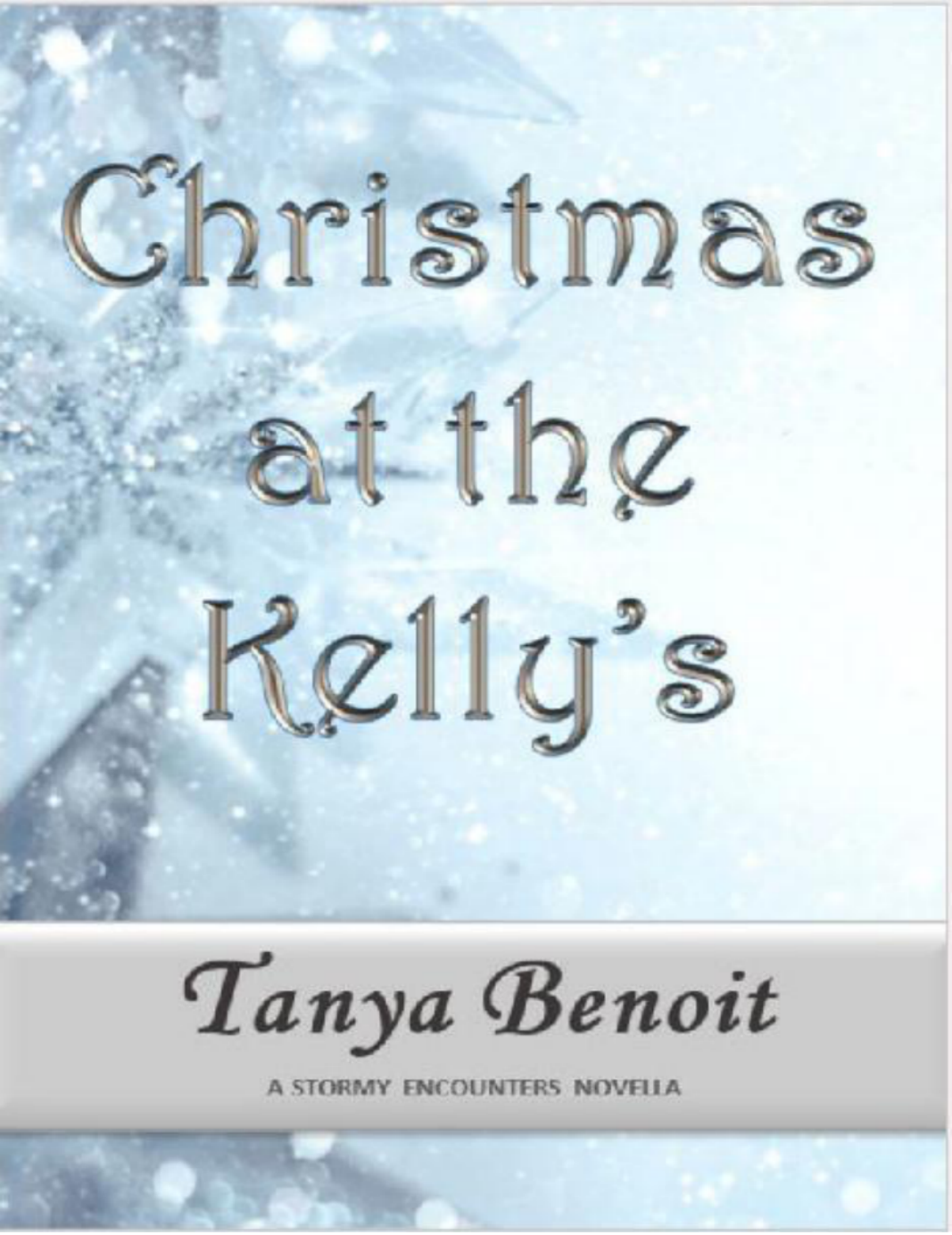


Tanya Benoit

A STORMY ENCOUNTERS NOVELLA

Christmas at the Kelly's

A Stormy Encounters Novella (Book 4.5)

TANYA BENOIT

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Christmas at the Kelly's
(Book #4.5 Stormy Encounters Series)
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This little novella is for my readers and followers.
From my house to yours, Merry Christmas to each and every one of you.

Chapter One

Violet hung fresh sprigs of holly, the bright red berries wrapping the foyer in a brilliant, festive aura. This year marked her second Christmas in Galway away from her family, and while she missed them terribly, she could not help but be grateful for her new family. She watched on with a merry heart as Charlotte fussed over a wreath she was crafting from ivy vines and laurel, her brows knit together in concentration. The caramel-haired lass was the closest thing Violet would ever call a sister, and her heart swelled inside her chest with that realization, praying Charley regarded her as such as well. No matter what, they were tethered by their husbands, regardless of the seemingly never-ending feud between the stubborn Kelly brothers.

"I hope ye're not too disappointed that I've come in here and pretty much taken over yer household," Violet said, pulling and straightening the obstinate leaves that refused to right themselves.

Charlotte tossed a bright smile her way, and the genuine glint in her eyes told Violet her worries were completely unfounded. It was clear that Charlotte was no more offended by Violet's presence than she might be of a summer sunrise. Relief and affection washed over her in welcoming waves.

Laying the messy circlet of greenery upon a table, Charlotte stepped into Violet's space and wrapped her arms around her sister-in-law's shoulders. "Please, do not even give it a second thought, Vy. This is your home as much as it is mine," Charlotte reassured her warmly, her eyes glistening with genuine sincerity.

Indeed, Liam had married the loveliest lass, and Violet was ever grateful for the bond they'd formed during her short visits back to the keep. When she dared to leave the countryside, that is. Her tiny cottage, tucked away in the shelter of the forest, away from feuds, meddling family folk, and burly dock workers, suited her just fine. Yet moments like this one, she would engrain on her mind to keep the stormy, lonely nights at bay. Aye, she had Brady and little Sean, but there was nothing sweeter than the camaraderie of sisterhood.

Violet pulled out of their sisterly embrace, pinning Charley with sincerity yet a little uncertainty. "Aye, perhaps it used to be my home, but we've been away at the cottage for months now, givin' ye time to

really make this place your own. And I have to say, ye've added such a beautiful touch," Violet admired, her gaze travelling from corner to corner of the foyer. And while she could appreciate the changes Charley had made, she feared Brady would not be as thrilled. The man could be as stubborn as an ox and set in his ways like an old codger. All he needed to complete the persona was a walking stick to wrap folks about the ears whenever he was disgruntled over some minuscule quandary or another. Perhaps she'd rather that instead of the silence that tended to fall around him when something was vexing him.

Nay, he would not be pleased at all when he finally stopped brooding over having to be here—instead of home for the holidays—and actually took in his surroundings. No longer did Kelly's keep resemble some cold, archaic fortress built to ward off warring clans. Charley's touch had finally warmed the corners with artifacts from across the seas, chasing the shadows from the granite darkness. A color palette from exotic places Violet had only dreamed of splashed about the foyer and beyond.

Charlotte's gaze followed Violet's around the grand space, her expression gleaming with pride. "Do you think Brady will like it? I mean, he has been taking his good, sweet time down at the shipyard, almost as if he's delaying his return to avoid me. Why, he didn't even come in for tea! He merely pushed you into this chaos and left," she chuckled self-consciously.

Brady had most definitely done that. He was, in truth, avoiding coming face to face with Charlotte like she bore the plague, and Violet was none-too-pleased with him for it. Ever since Liam shared Charlotte's true identity with the entire family, Brady had been ill-tempered and huffy—one might think of a sulking child. The very air around him was, at times, damn-near suffocating with angst and broodiness. Even when he played with his toddling little son, the smile he wore never quite reached his eyes, despite loving that wee bairn more than life itself.

The carriage ride from their tucked-away sanctuary had been exasperating, to say the least, with the incessant ticking in his jaw and the grunting—oh, the grunting—as he stared mindlessly out the window, lost in pensive thought. Violet had rolled her eyes too many times to count at the peevish mood he was in. So what if he hadn't wanted to come home for Christmas? Too bad if he'd fought her at every turn since the damn invitation had arrived! He *needed* to be with family this time of year, whether he knew it or not, and she had forced her hand. The result of her victory came with a price, though. Now that they were all under the same roof and Brady hadn't warmed to being back here—within a neck-wringing distance of Liam—

Christmas cheer in the Kelly home was hanging by a very thin thread.

Violet suspected that when he finally decided to make his appearance, the nautical décor accenting the walls in the foyer and trickling into the front sitting room and on into the study would not be well received, nor would the romantic dance of colors that showed off Charlotte's past. Violet envisioned a tirade of epic proportions where the stronghold was stripped of every reminder of Charlotte's past, present, and future. Including Liam!

Wise to the fact that Brady was likely to overreact, Violet felt somewhat responsible for easing Charley's mind, lest the poor girl's nerves be in a constant state of turmoil. "Never ye mind what that ol' bear has to say! Ye're a Kelly now, and ye've as much right to deck the halls as the rest of us," she affirmed. When Charlotte's grin failed to surface, Violet clutched the woman's fingers in a warm embrace, rubbing her thumbs across the backs of her hands and sighed sympathetically. "He will come around. Give him time. 'Tis only been a few months. He's set in his ways and needs time to adjust."

Charlotte squeezed Violet's fingers with desperation. "I do hope you're right. It kills me knowing he and Liam have been at odds and that it was my fault."

Violet scoffed. "Ha! Yer fault? Don't ye be blamin' yerself for anything. The two of them need to grow up and act like brothers. Havin' ye come into Liam's life has been the most wonderful thing to happen to the man, and I'll not have ye regrettin' any of it! Now, let us get that wreath fixed and hung before they return."

Even though she meant to reassure Charlotte, the bubbling nervousness in her belly screamed *retreat* before Brady did, in fact, come home to find his former home so drastically changed. Brady Kelly was adept at many things, but accepting change was not one of them.

As if he'd read her mind, Brady's footfalls approached with mind-bending intensity. There was no mistaking the heavy thunder of a brooding man in attack mode. Even without yet lifting her head to meet his gaze, her cheeks flushed with his nearness and butterflies danced inside her ribcage, aware of the danger barely suppressed inside this beautiful man of hers.

"How is everything down at the yard, love?" she casually queried as if she might turn his attentions away from the ornamenting taking place in this very hall. *His* hall.

Chancing a glance up to meet his gaze, sapphire eyes burrowed deep into her soul, but his reply came with nothing more than a cantankerous grunt as he brushed straight past her, disappearing inside the study. The raucous slamming of the door made both ladies flinch.

Violet's embarrassed gaze shot to Charlotte, who brushed a lone tear away, straightened her back, and squared her shoulders without a word.

Violet let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "He *will* come around, Charley. When Jack and Kylee arrive, ye'll see. He'll be so relieved that they've returned safely from their voyage that he'll not have time to think about such trivial things as Christmas trimmings and nautical décor," Violet reassured, the lie falling from her lips like warm butter.

Charlotte placed her hands on her hips, her head tilting to the side. "We both know his mood has little to do with the Mannings and everything to do with this feud between him and Liam. And most frustratingly, me!" she countered and then let out a deep sigh, her shoulders slumping again as her arms fell to her sides. "Violet, you don't understand how taxing this has been on Liam. He was filled with such hope when we received word that you would be joining us for the holidays. He was sure Brady had forgiven our deception and pardoned my crimes against the family. But as I can see from his behaviour, he most certainly has not. Perhaps he never will."

Violet rushed to her side, taking her hands and squeezing them earnestly. "He will," she persisted. "'Tis Christmas and I'll not have their childishness ruin the festivities for Sean. I know he's not quite old enough to understand the meaning of Christmas yet, but he is old enough to enjoy the traditions. Brady will not jeopardize that."

Charlotte caught a tear with her finger before it had a chance to tumble. Violet couldn't help but imagine the lass's life before now. She had been an English pirate, a sea captain to a band of thieves and brigands, and surely, she hadn't always been this soft in the heart, had she? Nay, she couldn't have. It would take a callous and hardened sort to lead raids and plunders. Living on the Kelly estate had changed her.

Charlotte huffed and rolled her eyes, dismissing her own show of emotion. "Fine. If you say so, but if they break out into an all-out brawl over the carving of the goose, I'll kindly let you break it up. I'm tired of being in the middle." Patting a fallen strand of hair back into place, she raised her chin and brushed invisible lint and wrinkles from her gown.

Violet chuckled and picked up a strip of ribbon, "I'm sure it won't come to that." But, from the look Charlotte shot her, the lass wasn't so sure.

Just then, as if a hurricane forced a chaotic gale, an unfamiliar blonde head whizzed by with a broomstick between his knees, clapping heartily at his hindquarter, with Mary, the Kelly housemaid giving chase, a fist raised and plump cheeks ruddy with exertion.

"Thomas! Thomas, ye little devil! Get yer arse back into that

kitchen with my broom!!!" Mary squelched. Noticing the ladies standing there, Mary halted in her tracks, gave a quick curtsy and cleared her throat. Addressing Charlotte, she stammered, "Er… Apologies, m'lady. The boy has been a complete nuisance ever since his mammy sent that letter. The lad really hoped to visit her this week, but the doctor said she wouldn't be able to receive visitors yet. Instead of makin' 'im sad and forlorn, I fear it's set the Devil straight into 'im. 'Tis everything in me not to spank the evil right out of 'im."

Violet turned to Charlotte with a barrage of questions. "What's this about, Charley? The lad's been staying here?"

Charlotte nodded, a worried crease forming on her brow. "Yes, for the past few weeks now. Mary, you go on back to whatever it was you were doing. Leave the boy to me."

Mary wiped the sweat from her forehead with the tail of a rag slung upon her shoulder and nodded. "All right, m'lady. But don't let 'im get his hands on the special family ornaments. No tellin' what he'll do to 'em. Ornary little…" Mary mumbled off as she waddled back toward the kitchen.

Violet had no idea that a lad had been staying with Liam and Charlotte; the subject hadn't been mentioned in their invitation. "Who is the child?" she asked, dropping the shimmering, golden ribbon onto the table.

"He was Liam's steward aboard the Caitlyn's Fancy. You and I should retreat into the solar. I'll call for tea and fruitcake, and I'll fill you in. I've had just about enough of pricking my fingers on these twigs and branches for one afternoon anyway," Charlotte sighed, eyeing the table teeming with pointy, prickly things with disdain.

Upon entering the room, Violet's gaze flew to the model ship anchored to the beams in the ceiling, hanging there as a stark reminder of Charlotte's roots. Violet's instinct was to pull the damn thing from its chains and hide it in a closet where Brady would never find it. *Devil's Last Dance* was painted across the stern, below the perfectly constructed windows, her black and red sails starched as if the wind billowed through them.

As if Charlotte could read her mind, she gazed up at the model in awe. "She is a perfect replica of my ship," she beamed proudly.

Dread bubbled within Violet's chest with the knowledge that the reproduction would serve as a taunting reminder of Charley's past, the under-handed manner in which she met Liam and the secrets and lies they fought so hard to conceal.

Violet cleared her throat, carefully choosing her words. "'Tis a beautiful…specimen, indeed."

"Violet, you look as if you've swallowed a hive of honeybees." Charlotte studied Violet for a moment, and then she let out a small

chuckle. “Liam already insisted we take it down and put it away until after the season. No fear, Vy; I’ve been waiting for Quoyle to come and help me do just that.”

Violet let out a sigh of relief, her hand flying to her chest to steady the hammering inside. This trip was going to be tiresome as it was; adding a vicious Brady to the mix would damn near kill her. “It truly is beautiful, but I can’t say I’m not relieved. Let’s not pretend that our being here isn’t going to be stressful, and we should do what we must to alleviate as much of that stress as we can.”

Charlotte pulled a tapestry ribbon hanging against the wall, ringing the bell in the kitchen; Mary appeared not long after.

“Yes, m’lady?” the frazzled woman asked.

“Tea, please, Mary, and a few pieces of that delightful fruitcake you’ve been hoarding in the cellar.” Although Charlotte’s tone was a jovial one, Violet couldn’t help the pang of irritation that had formed in her belly.

“Right away, m’lady,” Mary replied, curtsied and quit the room as if she were on fire.

Violet nearly swallowed her tongue. When she lived within these walls, she had never once rung that bell. She would never have dreamed of summoning Mary in such a manner—as if she were nothing more than a common servant. Mary was family to the Kelly men, a mother of sorts in the absence of their own. Violet bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from spewing the admonishment gnawing to get out.

Mary returned carrying a silver tray laden with steaming tea and delicious-looking treats and then curiously, curtsied upon departure. Who did Charlotte and Liam think they were? Royalty? They had no right or justification for having their servants bowing and curtseying. Violet couldn’t take one more minute of this madness.

“Charlotte, if ye don’t mind, might we discuss Lord Kelly’s expectations with regards to Mary, Mr. Harrow and the other house staff?” Violet took a sip and watched Charley’s expression over the rim of her teacup. The woman seemed so relaxed and aloof with her bright, easy smile.

Charlotte grinned, clearly oblivious to Violet’s meaning. “Absolutely. Liam and I have been struggling as of late with what might constitute proper behaviour amongst the staff. He insists they be treated as kin, but I'm afraid I have to disagree. There must be a line between the staff and family.”

“But…” Violet started but was quickly shut down.

“When I was young, I lived with my grandmother in London. Our servants did not speak without being spoken to; they always showed us the respect we deserved and without a word of protest. It must be

that way if the home is to run smoothly. Wouldn't you agree?" Charlotte lifted her cup and saucer to her lips and took a long sip, her green eyes dancing with pride over her newly-acquired status.

How would she make the lass understand?

Gently, Violet replied, "Well, I can't say I agree with ye, Charlotte. Mary has been with the family since the former Lord and Lady Kelly married. She has helped raise Liam and Brady, as well as Mr. Manning, as I've come to learn. And old Mr. Harrow, he's not long for this world. He should be enjoying his retirement instead of still carrying out butler duties. But seeing as we are the only family he has, he remains here.

"I'm sure Liam does not want you to break something that works perfectly fine. This family runs like a well-oiled engine. It has taken some time for that to happen, and I doubt very much Liam is willing to jeopardize his household. And I have to add, Lord Kelly will not be pleased to find out Mary is bein' treated like some common domestic." There. She'd said it. Brady would most certainly fly off into a tangent if he were to bear witness to his dear Mary's mistreatment.

Laying her saucer onto the occasional table separating them, Charlotte pinned Violet with a less than cheerful smirk. "Lord Kelly does not reside within these walls anymore, now does he? He decided to leave his household to Liam and me, and we are running things as we see fit."

An unintentional gasp escaped Violet's lips with the frank manner in which Charlotte regarded the subject. Deciding the argument was best left for another time, another place, Violet nodded politely and turned her attention to the matter of the youngster running through the house like a feral cat.

"Noted. Tell me about the boy, then. I'm genuinely curious," Violet prodded, retrieving a finger of fruitcake from the tray. Mary truly did make the best fruitcake, and if even for this delectable treat alone, coming back to the keep for the holidays had been worth it.

Charlotte laid down her beverage, swapping it for a treat as well. "As I said, he was aboard the Caitlyn's Fancy as Liam's young steward. During our time stranded in Newfoundland, we had taken a keen liking to the lad. He is loyal and lovable and perhaps a little wild, so for me, he was easy to fall in love with.

"Shortly after you and Lord Kelly retreated to the countryside, we received word that Thomas's mother had become gravely ill. Pneumonia, I believe. She is continually getting worse and is no longer strong enough to care for him. He couldn't be expected to fend for himself at just twelve years old, so she asked for our assistance in finding a good boarding school so he might at least receive an education while she recuperated. She figured his share of the treasure

we found last spring could pay to set up his future."

"Naturally." Violet's heart sank for the little fellow.

"Instead of sending him away, Liam and I decided to do one better. To take some of the stress off Mrs. Brennan while fighting to recover, we asked if he might stay here. Liam is more than qualified to instruct Thomas in his studies. So, Mrs. Brennan agreed."

"What of the boy's da? Does he not have a father?" Violet asked thoughtfully.

Charlotte's brow furrowed. "Unfortunately, he does not. His father was an older gentleman, marrying young Thomas's mother later on in life. Their house was hit hard by the famine. Two of Thomas's older brothers and a sister actually perished. But that was before Thomas was even thought about. When they started to recover after the blight, Thomas came along, but the effects of the hard times were lasting ones on the lad's father. I suppose his age contributed, but he died in his sleep three winters ago, which is why Thomas came to work for Liam in the first place. He was the man about the house and had to earn a living."

Violet clutched at her breast with the heartbreak and devastation of it all. "Lord Heaven above! That poor, poor boy!" She couldn't fathom leaving little Sean, forcing him to navigate a cruel and heartless world alone.

Charley nodded solemnly. "I fear the worst, Violet. The doctor usually allows Thomas to bring her flowers a few times a week but has instructed him to stay away. Despite the around-the-clock care she is receiving—thanks to Thomas's steady pay—I believe she is getting worse. I'll be surprised if she lives to see the New Year," she explained, pulling a kerchief from her apron pocket.

Violet stood quickly, her heart near to shattering with thoughts of what might become of the boy if his mother did not survive. She went to the window and looked down into the bailey where Thomas was chasing a scruffy dog as if his entire little world wasn't crumbling. Turning on her heels, Violet found Charlotte still drying her eyes, clearly in so much pain over it all. It seemed this particular employee had reserved a special place in her heart, untouchable by propriety and Charlotte's expectations of the staff.

"Well, I guess we will just have to make this the best Christmas ever. Is it possible to have his mammy moved here to the house? At least they would be together. We'll hire a nurse and have the doctor visit often to keep an eye on 'er," Violet suggested, a tiny sliver of hope brewing.

"I can certainly discuss it with Liam. If he agrees, I'll have him consult with the physician and perhaps put together a plan," she sniffed. "It'll do our Thomas a world of good."

Our Thomas? It seemed Charlotte was already attached to the lad, and despite their cutting words earlier regarding Mary, Violet understood her attachment. Thomas was a delightfully wild youngster.

Charlotte might require extra tutelage concerning running the home and managing the staff, but Violet vowed to remind her of the importance of family as well. Especially the family one *chooses* to claim as their own. Charlotte needed a reminder that she chose this life above her old one, and tearing it all down could only result in catastrophe.

Dealing with Brady and his unruly temper was one thing, but bringing this family back together was something else altogether. Violet prayed she was up to the task.

Chapter Two

After supper, Violet found Brady hunched over at his father's desk in the study. But of course, it was Liam's desk now, wasn't it? There was no hint of the late Sean Kelly amongst the neat stacks of papers and ledgers, nor was the man's relics from thirty-some years in the shipbuilding industry on display for all to see. This room, too, it seemed, had taken a drastic hit to enforce the new occupant's tastes. In such a short time, Liam and Charley had transformed the Kelly home into something entirely different, yet somehow, it felt warmer. Diverse and inviting.

Well, it would if Brady's ominous mien wasn't sucking the life out of the place. He was truly hard at work avoiding the rest of the family, and by the grievous expression on his handsome face, he was miserable in doing so.

As quietly as a mouse at Christmas mass, Violet approached her husband and wrapped her arms around him from behind. Despite having bristled just a little at her sudden touch, he swivelled in his seat, encasing her in his strong, safe embrace.

Brady sighed heavily. "He's done really well, Vy. He's kept up with the existing contracts and even procured a few new ones," he said quietly, almost as if he didn't quite believe it.

Violet's fingers dove into his black wavy hair and massaged his scalp. "Aye, love. 'Twas a smart decision to let him take things over on the business end. It's given us the freedom to live in the countryside on our little farm." Violet leaned down and kissed his brow tenderly. When she pulled away, his fingers dug into the fabric of her skirt just a little deeper. Ignoring the desperation of his touch, she asked, "When are ye going to visit the village to deliver their holiday baskets? I'd like to accompany ye again this year."

Reminding Brady of the importance of charity was sure to lighten his mood. He loved the village visits, loved the families' excitement for receiving their Christmas goose, and the delight on the little children's faces, having received a new doll or a carved wooden horse from the Kellys.

Brady's hands nearly crushed her waist as he nuzzled his face into her breast. "Christmas Eve, I should think. We'll set out early in the

mornin' to make sure we've reached each household and make it back in time for our own celebrations."

Violet's brows knit together. "There will be no celebrations if ye don't fix this with Liam. Have ye even seen 'im since we arrived?"

"Nay. He wasn't down at the shipyard today. I thought he might've been here helpin' his bride with the decorations. But of course, I should've known better. No doubt she has her ol' quartermaster-turned-game-warden, to do her bidding 'round here now," he grumbled.

Violet pulled away, but just a fraction. She needed to create distance between herself and the heat of him to find a way inside his conflicted heart and untangle the cords that were sure to suffocate it.

Holding his bearded face in her hands, she whispered, "Give them all a chance. Liam is no fool. If Charlotte and Mister Quoyle weren't good people, Liam wouldn't have brought them here. Ye know that, don't ye? He'd never jeopardize his family, his clan, or his homeland." She searched his steel-blue pools for some hint of understanding, a flicker of acceptance, but all she found was torture and torment.

Brady stood at his full height, towering over Violet by at least five inches. At one time, the sudden movement might've caused her to flinch and recoil, but a fire had ignited behind his eyes to replace his churlishness, and she knew his mind had shifted, refocussing his irritation.

Snatching her about the waist once more, he fisted handfuls of her hair, bringing his lips crashing down onto hers. Even through his sadness and frustration, he tasted divine. Violet's body seemed to meld into his with such ease and acquiescence, flashes of their passion erupting in her mind, that oh-so-familiar and delightful spark catching fire deep in the apex of her thighs.

His lips trailed down the side of her neck, stopping just long enough to take a generous bite where her pulse was surely pounding like a tiny drum. Violet hissed, and she clutched his shirt collar, pulling him even closer.

Brady had always had difficulty expressing his heart, and more times than not, he chose to take out his frustrations in a physical and somewhat feral manner. It was one of the things Violet loved most about her husband; he spoke best through action, never wasting time and energy on the words he found so hard to express.

His divine mouth carried on its descent down her neck and onto her shoulders, his calloused fingers sliding the dark blue blouse she wore out of his way as he went. The chilly air, combined with the heat of his breaths, caused her to shiver with anticipation.

"Brady…ye must not…we're in the study…anyone could…" she whispered, only barely able to catch her breath.

Brady growled some incoherent reply and continued his affections as if her half-hearted lecture carried no weight at all. Then, in one last fevered attempt to cease his madness, lest someone come in to find them in a most compromising position, Violet pushed his shoulders with all of her might, knocking him back a pace.

His fine Irish arse slammed against the mahogany desk, his chest heaving as if he struggled to catch a breath, but it was his eyes that told Violet the game had only just begun. The blue-silver hue seemed to dance amongst the candlelight, a most wicked and devilish glint reflecting his baser desires. A sideways grin formed on those perfect lips of his, and she knew.

He was the hunter, and she, his prey.

Throwing propriety out of her head, Violet giggled and took off for the other side of the room, shielding herself behind a leather wingback chair in front of the barely smouldering hearth.

"Runnin' from me again, sweet Vy? Ye do remember what happens when ye run from me, don't ye?"

While his words may have sounded menacing and his tone had lost all hint of playfulness, Violet was most certainly not afraid. If this little game of theirs would help heal his heart and bring the man back from the brink of utter torment, then she was glad to play it.

"Why, Lord Kelly, a lady *has* to protect herself from such wild beasts. Wouldn't ye agree?" she chided lightly, her brow raising with the taunt.

Brady bared his teeth, grunted, and gave chase.

In an instant, he was face to face with her, nothing more than soft, brown leather separating them. His arm shot out to reach her, but she was too quick, dashing again behind the desk.

She eyed the closed door to her left. If she feigned a sprint to her right, he would mirror her movements. Then, if she turned at the last minute, she might make it to the door.

"I can see the wheels turnin', Vy. Ye won't get away from me. Ye know that." His voice was thick, laced with gravel and lust, and he was estimating her calculations even before she could think them.

Her temperature had risen to an ungodly degree, and she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Just not in a place where anyone could walk in at any moment and find them in an embarrassing state of undress.

Violet clutched the desk, her eyes darting left to right, trying to outsmart her clever husband. Finally, her gaze landed on a rather heavy-looking book, and she picked it up, raising it above her head.

Brady shook his head. "Don't do it. I'll redden yer arse," he threatened, barely above a whisper.

Without a thought to his delicious warning, Violet threw the heavy-

bound edition of some boring builders' manual at his head and dashed out the door. The volume landed with a thud, but she knew she'd missed her mark when his booming shout tore through the evening air, splintering her courage. Reaching their room was her singular focus, not whether the rest of the house would witness their playful, marital tiff. Finding a place of safety and, above all, privacy was all she could think about. She couldn't remember a time in recent history where her feet moved as swiftly or her lungs had struggled to do their job.

Violet fought to take the stairs two at a time to put some distance between them, but Brady's long strides were no match for hers. *Sweet Jesus, he's quick.*

If he caught her before she reached sanctuary, there was no telling what he might do in the heat of passion. After all, Brady Kelly was a passionate man and lover. Her insides tingled with the heady realization that tonight she would embark on healing her husband's broken pride and perhaps, even his heart. If it killed her, by God, she would try to make him see that there was more to Liam and Charley's marriage than something altogether sinister.

With the ornately engraved wooden door in view as she skidded around the last corner, her chest burned with exertion, but her heart had caught fire too. With each roar, each raspy threat of what would come when he caught her, the excitement grew into a heavy knot of duelling butterflies in her belly.

Her desperate hand reached for the door latch, but much too late as Brady's brutal arm snatched her about her waist, spinning her around and into him. The heavy puffs of his breath skated across her cheek, and she was suddenly powerless.

Brady captured her within his arms. "Aye, ye knew I'd catch ye, little imp. Now what shall I do with ye?" he ground out, his tone steady yet aggressive. His thighs pushed against hers, walking her backward, crushing her exhausted body against the door, its carved, sharp edges digging into her flesh.

Feigning coyness, the corner of her mouth lifted into a slight grin. She couldn't help the hunger as her wanton gaze travelled down his nose, studying the tick in his chiselled jaw and settling upon his lips. The rigid steel of his need dug into her abdomen without mercy, and she struggled again to formulate a thought, much less a sentence.

Violet reached her hand behind her and pressed the latch. Two tangled bodies spilled into the room, grunting, huffing and tearing at each other's burdensome clothing.

Scurrying to the bed, Violet paused, pointing her finger behind him. "Door, husband."

Brady kicked it shut with his boot and then turned to her again and

grinned. How could a simple gesture wreak so much havoc on her heart and mind? Her body already knew what was yet to come, licking at the deepest, most intimate parts of her, fanning the flames within. A firestorm was erupting deep in her belly as he stalked across the room, removing his shirt.

She felt so vulnerable sitting there before him as he loomed over her, shirtless, potent and intimidating. Cupping her chin, he brought her gaze up to meet his. His eyes shone with desire and lust, but there was no denying that a deep love mingled there too.

"I ought to carry out a good and thorough spankin' for makin' me chase ye like this," he said softly.

Violet tilted her head to the side and licked her lips. "That's what I'm countin' on."

"Lady Kelly, ye are a brazen little wench. Now, stand up. 'Tis time to relieve ye of that blouse and skirt."

Violet did as she was told, a little shocked at Brady's sudden show of restraint. It wasn't so very long ago when he would have torn the clothes from her body with more passion than she thought she could endure. Instead, he took his torturous time with each button and then slid the blouse down her shoulders slowly and tenderly. Then, turning her to face the bed, he unlaced her stays, discarding them onto the floor. The rush of cold air prickled her skin but caused an ache between her thighs so incredible she squeezed them together to find some relief.

Breathing became difficult. Her mind had become a tangled web of nonsense. Standing behind her, his hands lightly dusting her skin, nearly drove her to complete madness. She had no idea what his intentions were. Would he bend her over and spank her as he'd done before? Or would he find contentment bringing her to the brink of insanity with nothing more than the feather of a touch?

"Please, Brady. I…I want…" she pleaded as if she were begging for her very life. But it wasn't her existence that was in jeopardy; it was the burning ache inside that would undoubtedly be her undoing if he didn't remedy it—and fast.

Brady chuckled behind her, the sound reverberating deep in his chest, transferring into hers. "I know what ye want, sweet Vy." Whipping her around to face him, he drove his fingers into her long, wavy hair as if he might crush her skull between his palms. His lips came down upon hers, his tongue plunging into her mouth, tasting and exploring.

Of their own volition, her fingers found the fastening of his trousers and made quick work of removing them. Pushing them down over that fine arse of his, her hands lingered for a spell, pulling another devious chuckle from him. Throaty and playful now—wholly

distracted from the misery he was so hell-bent on living in.

With no barrier between them, Brady's hot skin set her ablaze, a fevered rush of wet heat pooling between her thighs. How grateful she was to have found a husband who could do such inappropriate things to her with nothing more than the sound of his voice. He leaned into her until they seemed to fuse together, and then fell onto the bed in a heated heap.

He kissed her neck, trailing his way down her clavicle until his lips found her breasts. He sucked one stiff bud into his mouth while his hand sought her pleasure centre, teasingly, gloriously teasingly. With a mind completely void of coherent thought and a body entirely at his mercy, Violet gave way to the first burst of ecstasy. The night had only just begun.

The following morning brought melodies from songbirds nestled safely within the yawning branches of a grand hawthorn tree just outside the window. Violet stretched her overtaxed arms above her head, grateful that Brady had insisted they relinquish their claim to the master chamber. This smaller room, located in his mother's wing of the manor, was the same magnificent chamber Violet herself had stayed in before she and Brady married. Not only did it hold precious memories of that time in her life, but it also had the best access to the gardens and was much sunnier and cheerful than the master chamber.

While Violet felt quite at home in Caitlyn Kelly's sanctuary, she doubted that Brady shared the sentiment. He'd renounced all claims of being heir to the Kelly fortune, giving Liam complete control over it all. The estate, the tenants, the company—everything. But, of course, that was before he'd learned Charlotte's true identity. Since, Brady had come to regret his decision, as he'd left everything in the hands of strangers he could never trust. Unfortunately, their future depended upon his ability to move past this, and Violet feared he might never be able to.

Charlotte had been a pirate. A vicious scourge on polite society. The woman could have killed Liam and the crew of the Caitlyn's Fancy in her pursuit of the revered Mendez fortune. The fact that she hadn't would never make things right with Brady. And just because she and Liam brought back the treasure together changed nothing. Charlotte still owed the Kellys a debt that would never be paid. The Brady from another life and another time would have had the lass locked away in the dungeon, instructing Jack to throw the key into the Shannon. Charlotte would have never again seen the light of day. Thankfully, Brady was no longer that man, but that didn't mean her treachery didn't haunt him every minute of every day.

Violet turned toward her husband, grateful for how far he'd come. Despite her displeasure over his and Liam's feud, she was proud of her

husband, even for all his broken little pieces.

As if he could sense her adoring scrutiny, his eyes fluttered open, the silver flecks amongst deep cobalt settling on her. “Good morn’,” he grinned. “What I wouldn’t give to know what yer thinkin’.”

Violet rolled into his awaiting embrace and tucked herself into the crook of his shoulder. “Oh, nothin’ much, love. Just how ye’re the finest man in all of Ireland and how lucky I am to have found ye.”

“Is that so? And what would ye say are my best qualities? Is it how easily I can satisfy ye while makin’ ye crave more? Or would ye say it’s my manly physique that’s got ye all flushed?” Brady queried while his mischievously wandering hand explored her sated form nestled next to him.

Violet sighed, letting a little laugh bubble from her throat. “Nay, none of those things. But while I do adore those qualities, husband, I find myself appreciative of your loving and tender nature. How I can initiate an all-out war and incense ye beyond all belief, yet ye never fail to absolve me. Ye’ve never failed to be a good husband, father, brother….”

Brady shot up to a sitting position like he’d caught fire. “Nay, not this again. Don’t even finish that sentence, Vy.”

Violet sat up and leaned into him, her fingers travelling beneath the coverlet, taking him in hand. With long, sure strokes, his manhood sprang to life, and Brady fell back against the pillow with a frustrated groan.

“Just promise me ye’ll try to make peace,” she whispered, gazing down affectionately.

Brady’s brows knit together; his jaw tensed. “Christ, woman! Ye’ll be the death of me yet.”

“Promise me. For Sean. For us.”

“Fine. I’ll try to be nice, but just ’til after the holidays. Then we’re goin’ the feck home. Now kiss me before I change my mind.” Brady gripped the nape of Violet’s neck, pulling her into a fervent, fiery kiss.

At that moment, Brady must’ve felt like the victor, but Violet chuckled under her breath with the satisfaction of knowing that it was she who’d been the Kelly family champion. And by God, if this was how she had to wake her husband each morning to start his day on the right foot, then she was only happy to oblige.

Brady rolled over, settled between her thighs and entered her slowly, sucking in a breath between his teeth.

Aye, Violet had indeed won this glorious battle.

Chapter Three

Breakfast in the Kelly home was no small affair, especially when the Christmas season was causing excitement and elation amongst the entire household. As expected, at precisely seven, the creaking of doors, followed by footsteps echoing through the hallways, caused a nervous smile to take hold. Violet couldn't decide if her nerves resulted from the news she was yet to deliver or the impending argument that was sure to break out if Brady and Liam prodded at one another, as brothers were wont to do.

Sitting there at the enormous table set for a small army, Violet buttered a fresh biscuit, still warm from the oven and devoured it before anyone was the wiser. Her sudden state of gluttony could be forgiven. After all, she was eating for two again. But that was a secret she was not yet ready to share.

Oh, there was no doubt that Brady would be thrilled with the prospect of having another tot to fill their cottage with laughter, but Violet had to be sure her timing was impeccable. On too many an occasion, she'd almost blurted it out, for her excitement was just about killing her, but rationality said she should wait until Jack and Kylee returned from their voyage. Brady would definitely want his oldest, closest friend in attendance to share the good news.

A small sliver of worry settled in her belly with the thought of Mr. and Mrs. Manning out there on the seas in winter weather. Although their last correspondence had boasted an early return from Newfoundland—notice for Violet to expect them as early as the last week of November—they were yet to arrive. As if the sudden concern stoked her voracious appetite, Violet spied another flaky treat, debating on whether or not she might swallow it before the others arrived and witnessed her morning savagery. Worry and love-making made for a ravenous combination.

Just as she wiped the butter from her lips, heavy boots pounded the hardwood, and the door swung wide. Without turning her attention to the boisterous calamity, her heart already knew the noisy footfalls of her brutish husband. His warmth enveloped her as his arms wrapped about her shoulders and his lips kissed the top of her head.

"Ye smell like butter, Vy," he murmured playfully, making his way

to her left at the head of the table. Violet blushed and dabbed away any lingering evidence with her napkin.

"Well, I can't be expected to wait all day for everyone else to get their arses out of bed, now can I?" she giggled.

His cobalt gaze splintered her heart. "If they awoke to a gift such as I had, I can imagine they'd be reluctant to come down for breakfast too. I ought to order yer little arse right back up them stairs so we can skip the entire family debacle."

"Ye wouldn't dare! And ye promised to try."

"Then button up that shirt before I carry ye up there myself," he threatened, narrowing his gaze, letting it travel from her face to her open blouse, where no doubt her ample cleavage was on display. Violet had intended to wear a heavy tweed day dress on the odd chance that she might venture into the village to pick up some extra treats for the children to go in the Christmas baskets. But that was before Mary had burst into her chambers delivering warm wash water and a dismal and damn-near depressing weather report. Staying in and close to the hearth with her adoring husband seemed like a better idea.

Violet stuck out her chin defiantly, the grin she fought so desperately to subdue tickling the corner of her mouth of its own volition. "Come and button it yerself, *m'lord*," she taunted.

Brady grasped the table with both hands and rose from his seat, no doubt ready to take her to task for the taunting little imp she was proving to be this morning. He stopped short when Liam's voice grew near in the hall. His focus shifted to the opened door behind Violet and then pinned her with an almost helpless look. In a single moment, his face had grown from deliciously provocative to forming thin lines of a tormented scowl.

Her hand covered his, and with her reassuring smile, his light-hearted countenance returned.

Waggling a stocky finger in her direction, his eyes full of fire, he ground out his retort almost on a whisper, "*M'lady*, that shirt will possess nary a button by the end of this day."

As always, the mere insinuation of their promised intimacy caused a firestorm to erupt in her belly. Her hand flew to her mouth to stifle a saucy reply, lest Liam and Charley enter to find them rutting atop the table like the beasts they'd become. And Violet had no doubt that her sass would incite such beastly behaviour from her beloved.

As if called upon by a higher power, their moment was blown to smithereens with the entry of hungry family members who had *not* arrived early enough to filch the first morsels of Mary's biscuits.

"Violet, you're here already! You're quite the early riser, I see. I hope you haven't started without us." Charlotte cooed as she brushed

past the back of Violet's chair, then behind Brady to the other side of the table.

"Of course not. I haven't been here long, but I'm glad ye didn't dawdle; I'm famished." Violet's gaze wandered to Brady, hoping he wouldn't tell her little secret. He winked in her direction, a telling sign that he wouldn't.

Brady's glacial gaze burrowed into Liam, who appeared to be trying his damnedest to ignore the thick, murderous atmosphere, but Brady's inhalations alone could very well suffocate all four of them! Violet cleared her throat, quietly garnering her husband's attention, sending him a reassuring smile, reminding him of his promise made only a while ago.

Brady cleared his throat. "Good mornin', Brother."

"Good morning. I take you slept well," Liam replied, the veritable definition of a gentleman as he pulled out Charlotte's chair and helped her to be seated.

Curiously, Liam took a seat at the foot of the table, far from his new bride. On any other day, the head of the table was reserved for him as the manor's new lord. However, this day, he had relinquished his position without a word of opposition, an unspoken rule and tradition that the eldest reclaimed charge when he came home, over-ruling previous practices.

A pregnant pause ate up the silence, and Violet's heartbeat rushed in her eardrums. She studied her husband carefully.

The blood pumping through her system seemed to calm when finally, he spoke. "Aye. I did. Glad ye haven't refurbished Mother's chambers," Brady replied, a phony grin and a mischievous glint taking hold. "I would've had a hell of a time tryin' to sleep in a stranger's bed or, God forbid, a hanging hammock."

Liam gaped at Brady with a cocked brow, but his cool demeanour never wavered. "Of course," he simply replied, his hazel glower saying everything he dare not vocalize.

Violet fought the urge to unceremoniously kick the stubbornness straight out of her husband beneath the table. Surely, he wasn't trying to goad Liam into a row only moments after being reminded of his promise, was he? Instead of the toe of her slipper jabbing his shin, Violet reached out to place her hand atop his white, clenching knuckles. But as if her touch might scald him, he pulled away and stood, his chair brusquely scraping across the floor. She fought with her lungs, begging them to expand when he began to speak again. He was not going to let this go.

"I mean, I look around at my childhood home and can barely remember what it looked like before. I do *not*, however, remember a massive sailing ship hanging from the beams in the solar," Brady

barbed as he made his way to the sideboard, from where the aroma of bacon and sausage wafted, making Violet salivate despite the brewing argument. But instead of moving toward it to pick up her meal, fear forced her to stay right where she sat and wait out the impending storm. She and Brady would have words this evening. Of that, there was no doubt.

Suddenly, her fear of the unknown was replaced by pure, simple fury.

Any attempt at diffusing the situation was lost when Liam tossed his napkin atop his place setting and stood, chancing an apologetic glance at Violet and then went to Charley's side, leaned in and kissed her forehead.

"Let me see if I am hearing you correctly. The childhood home you *so loved, so revered,* has changed, has it? All your boyhood memories replaced by your brother's acquisitions?" Liam challenged, making his way toward the sideboard.

Filling his plate with an enormous helping of cheese and sausage, Brady turned, shooting Liam a scathing glance. "Da would be so ashamed, Liam. Ye've taken his home, the place his family built and defended for generations, and ye've made a mockery of it. And not to mention Ma. I haven't even begun to explore the rest of her wing yet. What have ye got hidin' up there? An extra figurehead and a set of rudders? 'Tis ridiculous," Brady growled, his voice not having been raised in anger just yet. Violet found some small measure of gratitude in that because when Brady's temper reared its ugly head, there was no imagining what he might say or do.

Her mind flitted back to the nights she'd spent in the cellar beneath what she now called her home. Brady had been irrational and pig-headed then, and he was mirroring that same behaviour now, only, what could he possibly do? Send Liam to the dungeon cell beneath the keep for merely making himself at home here? *Madness!*

Despite the insanity, Violet bit her tongue. And as much as she detested confrontations such as this one, perhaps it was time to lay it all out there. Get it over and done. Then, and only then, could her family begin to heal. Her gaze shifted to Charlotte's, who remained as steadfast as ever, pretentiousness and pride firmly intact. The two women locked eyes for far too long, but Violet understood the silent words between them. Liam wasn't defending Charlotte's tastes in home décor. Instead, he was valiantly defending his wife and her honour, and Violet could nary find the fault in that.

Liam picked up his plate, hesitated as if he was battling with his inner demons as well, and then tossed it down with a clang, curious behaviour for the mannerly and flawless younger Kelly. But it seemed that Liam, too, had reached a breaking point.

"You know what, Brady? You can go straight to hell. This place has never been your home. Not when we were children, when you and Mother were isolated from the rest of us in that blasted cottage, and certainly not now that we're grown, and you've moved your own family out there in the sticks. You've made it abundantly clear that you've wanted nothing to do with this family's legacy."

Brady held up his hand to stop Liam's uncharacteristic outburst, but the younger Kelly was having none of it and was now waving a finger in Brady's face. "Why, I do believe that was the entire reasoning behind the constant bickering between you and Father. He'd failed to mould you into the next head of the clan, and you drove that down his throat every chance you got. He wanted you to have the world. But you, the ungrateful bastard that you are, wanted nothing he had worked for. *Your* home is in the country as it always has been.

"So, to sum it up for you, you have no ties to this place, and it, in return, binds you only in falsely conjured romantic memory. Now, if you don't mind, I think I'll go to the kitchens, fix myself and my wife a plate of more palatable fare. Charlotte?" Liam held out his hand and waited for Charley's hand to slip into his, never once taking his eyes off Brady, who quite surprisingly had lost his tongue.

If he could articulate a sentence or two, what might he say? Liam had been correct on all points. Kelly's keep was Liam's home, and Brady had no business voicing his displeasure over any changes made in his absence. Violet sighed, wishing their argument had been as trivial as that. But, aye, it went so much deeper, and she couldn't help but wonder when the family would implode on itself.

When the newlyweds were out of sight, Brady let out the breath he'd obviously been holding and hung his head.

Violet's first instinct was to go to him and offer comfort, but she could not in good conscience give in. He'd behaved hideously when he'd promised he wouldn't. He had agreed he would try to get along, but the first chance he got to slip in a snide remark, he'd taken it.

Her belly burned with fury. "I cannot believe ye just did that! How could ye?" Violet rose and went to close the door, but before she reached it, a ball of blonde hair whizzed by her and straight to the sideboard, small hands diving into a tray of apricot tarts.

Brady halted him with a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Lad! What's the meanin' of burstin' into a man's breakfast room without an invitation? Who are ye? Where are yer folks?" Brady boomed, causing the boy to flinch, but only a little. Violet suspected it would take a lot more than Brady Kelly to frighten this little scamp.

"Name's Thomas, m'lord. Don't ye remember me from when ye visited the capt'n in Newfoundland last spring? I got chores to do early this morn', and Miss Mary says I'm not allowed to eat in the

kitchen today. Says she needs a break from me bein' underfoot or some such foolishness. So, if ye don't mind, I'll be eatin' and gettin' right to it." Thomas practically ignored Brady's foul aura, but then as if a flicker of something passed in his young mind, he smiled awkwardly and picked up a plate from the stack. Upon it, he placed a tart, a bowl of porridge and two thick slices of bread; a voracious appetite, this one. "Beggin' yer pardon, m'lady. I'm just noticin' ye there. Ma didn't raise me to be so impolite in front of the ladies."

Violet blew an auburn tendril out of her eye and smiled. "'Tis quite all right, Thomas. Pick up something to eat, sit down at the table 'til it's finished and then get to yer chores," she said, thoughtfully, forcing some semblance of a smile.

Brady shot her a brooding glare. He was still ready to fight; if not with Liam, Violet would make a perfect substitute. But she was having none of that—not with a young audience. "I think I'll join ye if ye don't mind the company. Brady? Are ye stayin' as well?" Violet retrieved her plate from her previous setting and brought it down to the place next to Thomas, shooting an indignant glare at her husband.

The silver flecks in his blue eyes danced with curiosity. No matter how angry Brady was right now, the youngster sitting in Liam's seat at the foot of the table was a mysterious, albeit familiar young fellow. From all the stories Violet had heard of Brady and his wild childhood ways, the similarities between them were uncanny. Both untamed and unruly. If Brady spent any amount of time with the lad, he might undoubtedly find images of himself in there.

Brady tossed a slice of ham and a chunk of cheese onto his plate and set it down at the head of the table.

"There's room over here, husband," Violet said, studying the crease in his forehead.

"Fine where I am," he replied curtly, viciously stabbing the meat with his fork.

"Ye know, m'lord, Ma says 'tis important for family to eat together at least once a day. That's often the only time when folks can catch up on each ot'ers lives. I think it's silly. Only takes me a second to woof down me grub," Thomas mumbled between mouthfuls.

"Don't be talkin' with yer mouth full," grumbled Brady, who seemed to be studying the boy through furrowed brows.

"Aye, m'lord. Lady Violet, will ye be takin' a stroll to the market today?" the little imp inquired, mouth yet firmly stuffed, ignoring Brady's chide. But it hadn't been a chide, had it? It had been an order. Brady's impatience was in fine form this morning, so thin he'd argue with a child!

"Why, I had considered it. But I fear the weather is unfavourable today. If the wind picks up at these temperatures, I'll return home as a

block of ice," Violet replied and took a sip of her tea. "I think 'tis best if I stay inside today."

Thomas mopped up the remainder of the porridge with half a slice of bread, wiped his face with his coat sleeve and pinned her with a sad gaze. "Oh, that's too bad," he murmured. The disappointment on his face cut through her, straight to the heart.

Violet glanced at Brady, the youngster's unhappiness having a soothing effect on her, making her forget that she was mad as hell at Brady for goading Liam into an argument. "Thomas, did ye need something in the village?" she asked, picking up his empty plate and bringing it to the sideboard. Not having servants back at the cottage had certainly made her appreciate how hard Mary worked, and she was not keen on adding to it.

Thomas stood quickly, the apples of his cheeks reddening. "Was hopin' someone could take a letter to Ma. Doc says I have to stay away for now. Can't even bring flowers like I used to. I just don't want 'er thinkin' I've moved away and forgot about 'er, is all."

"Do ye have the letter with ye?" Violet asked.

"Ye'll bring it to 'er then?" he asked excitedly as his hand dove into his trouser pocket.

"If not today, Thomas, I'll try my very best tomorrow."

His blue eyes danced with pure joy. Placing the letter on the table, he quickly moved in as if he was about to throw his arms around Violet's neck but caught himself in mid-hug. Clearing his throat and regaining some modicum of self-control, he said, "Thank ye so much, Lady Violet. I know it's awfully forward of me to ask, seein' as we've only just met an' all, but Charley rarely goes to the village, and the capt'n only goes so far as the shipyard. I'd be ever-so-grateful if ye could bring back news of how Ma is farin'."

"That's *Lady Charlotte* to you, young man," she corrected, tapping his nose with a soft fingertip.

Thomas beamed back at her. "I ain't called 'er that, ever!" he laughed, slapping his knee as if he was about to fall over.

The lad certainly thought respectfully addressing Charlotte was hilarious, and she reminded herself to talk to Charlotte and Liam about it later. The boy must be taught to respect his elders!

Learning Charlotte rarely left the property explained why she was filling the home with her own creature comforts. Perhaps she was yet to feel welcomed by the villagers, and maybe, they too had learned her true identity and had been less than amicable. Violet would have to remember to ask Charlotte later and reassure her that the clan were a forgiving sort—that if she were being treated with a frigid shoulder, it wouldn't last.

Ignoring his outburst, Violet smiled. "I will try my very best,

Thomas. Now run along. Mary 'ill have ye tarred and feathered if ye don't milk that cow soon."

Off the scamp sped, out the door, his quick-paced footfalls echoing through the hallway and beyond. Violet turned to her husband, her ire quickly resurfacing.

"Ye see? That's a lad who truly treasures the value of family. Ye'll do well to take a lesson from him." Despite her disappointment in Brady's behaviour, there was never a time when she could stay angry with him for long. He was a riddle, one that must be solved carefully, lest the entire world suffer the brunt of his wrath. Families were complicated, and she'd do well to remember that his family was no different. Heck! She hadn't even seen her folks in well on two years, and they only lived a county away! If that wasn't complicated, nothing was.

Brady drew in a tired breath, his brows knit tightly together in thought. "I just can't understand why *I'm* expected to forgive *her* after everything that's happened."

Violet rushed to sit beside him and took his hand in hers. "Oh, ye poor, tormented man. If ye truly believed that folks shouldn't be given a second chance, then why am I here? Why would I have married ye? For love, that's why. Think about that. Liam loves her, and I've no doubt she feels the same."

"But Vy, the lass is a pirate!" Brady stood suddenly and walked to the frosted window, where just beyond, the wind was beginning to cause the tree branches to dance, shaking the previously fallen snow from the limbs in fluffy clumps. Violet couldn't remember the last time she'd seen snow at Christmas time, and while it was pretty to look at, it only added to the chill in the room.

Tucking herself into the crook of his shoulder and draping an arm about his waist, she gently reminded him, "Charlotte w*as* a pirate. People change, Brady. Perhaps not overnight, but they do. Especially when their hearts are the motivation for doin' so. Just look at you. Ye changed, haven't ye?"

Brady grunted his reply but said nothing else to the contrary, yet he held her there with him. Violet knew she'd finally struck a chord and his mind was in complete and utter torment. Letting go of one's anger and issuing a decree of forgiveness was difficult for most. But for Brady Kelly, it seemed damn-near impossible. He was an obstinate and stubborn man, after all.

Violet reached up and kissed his cheek. "I'll go and wake Sean. Perhaps he can infuse ye with some joy here this morn'. But while I'm gone, please think about what I've said. 'Tis not enough for ye to *say* ye forgive Liam and Charley; ye have to feel it in here," she added, gently patting his chest over that huge heart of his.

Violet left the breakfast room in search of the tiny tot, leaving Brady to wrestle with his very big emotions all on his own. She wouldn't push any further. Pushing him did nothing to bring this family together. All she could do was be patient and hope to God they all got through the holidays unscathed.

Chapter Four

Charlotte paced the study like an enraged badger. What nerve did Brady Kelly have coming into her home and dictating the state of things? Who did he think he was? He might be Liam's older brother, and he might've once been the lord and protector of the people, but he had since revoked those rights, leaving Liam to manage things; this was a well-known fact.

"He has no right to be angry with us for making the place ours!" she shouted, the heat of her rage scorching her cheeks. Her poor, dear husband had been reduced to a sop, sitting in the leather wingback in front of the fireplace, silent since they'd finished their breakfast some while ago.

Finally, he sighed and spoke. "Charley, my darling, Charley," he said, shaking his head. "If you believe he's actually angry about that, you're completely mistaken. I told you he wouldn't let go of the fact that you plundered our cargo and brought the Kelly empire to heel—despite the ring on that pretty little finger of yours. Brady does not forgive easily," Liam explained, leaning forward, his elbows resting upon his thighs and hands clasped together.

Charlotte softened her tone some, a constant battle waging within to put her own past behind her. "What if we sit down and have a discussion with him? I mean, this is all very taxing. We need to lay all this animosity to rest. I'll not have Thomas bearing witness to quarrels and rows this Christmas! I'll not stand for it, Liam! The boy needs warmth and stability."

"I couldn't agree with you more. Have you been talking to Violet about having Thomas's mother come here to live while she recovers?" he asked.

"Yes, we've discussed it, and she seemed keen on the idea. Have you visited the doctor? Will it be wise to move Mrs. Brennan in her current state?" Charlotte asked, pouring herself a dram of whiskey, a habit she refused to give up entirely; however, she would have preferred Caribbean rum. When she and Liam were alone, there was no harm in enjoying a taste here and there, was there?

"Moving her cannot do more harm, in my opinion. She and Thomas live in near squalor compared to here. I can only see it as the right

thing to do. Being here can only help her condition."

Liam shook his head. "It is a shame that the lad hasn't been able to enjoy the fruits of his labours or the gains of our plunder. I would not be surprised to learn he's completely penniless now with what the doctor is charging. Extortion, in my opinion." Charlotte knew Liam didn't really believe that, but he was frustrated with Thomas's refusal to let Kelly family coffers help pay the bills.

Liam rose to stand before the hearth, rubbing the back of his neck. How Charlotte wished she could somehow erase the past few hours, revert to a time when it was just she and her adoring husband all alone in their sanctuary above stairs, to a time before he and Brady nearly came to blows. For some reason, everything Liam had done to prove himself to his brother seemed moot in Brady's eyes. Couldn't he see that Liam had grown and was not only able but fiercely capable?

Charlotte poured him a drink as well; despite the early hour and the fact that he didn't normally imbibe before the evening meal, he certainly seemed to need one. He downed it in one swift gulp.

"This mess with your brother is taking a toll on you, husband. I should like to see you both make amends before it's too late—before you're no longer considering yourselves brothers," Charley pleaded, swirling the remnants of her drink around in her glass.

Liam pinned her with an agonizing look. "How are we going to make him see past *your* past? How can I convince him that you're everything good and right with the world—my world?"

As if his heartbreak would tear hers to shreds, Charlotte's eyes welled up with tears. "We will. But right now, we have a more pressing concern, and that's to bring holiday joy to a little boy's life. So let's promise here and now that we will do whatever is necessary to do just that. For Thomas's sake," she whispered, hugging into his middle.

Liam's hand dove into her hair, and he kissed the top of her head. "I promise, love. Thomas needs us now more than Brady's damn pride needs healing."

Charley reached up on her toe-tips and placed a kiss upon his whiskey lips. "I am in complete agreement. Let's you and I dress for the weather and head into the village to speak to the doctor. I want to hear what he has to say for myself this time. The sooner we can get Mrs. Brennan moved out here, the sooner Thomas's behaviour will improve. He's been addling Mary into a frenzy, to be honest."

Liam nodded, his brows knitting together in contemplation. "That sounds fine, love. I'll have the lad ready the carriage with a warm blanket."

Despite dreading the harsh looks she would receive from the villagers, Charlotte thought a ride might offer a much-needed

distraction to the quandary surrounding family squabbles. Yet, the expression on his face spoke volumes to his reluctance to go. “What’s the matter? Why the mournful expression? I thought some time away from this place might do you good.”

“Yes, and I agree. I’m just worried about the lad and think we should keep our business regarding Mrs. Brennan between us. If we tell Thomas prematurely and the doctor disagrees with our suggestion, it might add to the boy’s melancholy. We wouldn’t want to get his hopes up for nothing,” Liam explained, his face a puzzle of confliction. He sighed, shaking his head. “And I loath having to reiterate the subject, but Brady’s lack of support of our marriage could thwart all our efforts of bringing joy into this house over the holidays.” Lack of support might be an understatement. A more accurate assessment was Brady’s peevishness and penchant for having all-out hissy-fits.

Charlotte took both their glasses and laid them on the mantle. Capturing Liam’s hand in hers, she said, “Agreed. Let us go and get ready. And when we return, we will have a sensible conversation with Brady and Violet over a glass of brandy.” With any luck, the former head of the house might choke on his. Charley chided herself for having such wicked, wicked thoughts, but she couldn’t help the devilish laugh that bubbled around in her belly when she pictured it.

She couldn’t blame Liam for having mixed emotions. Thomas’s happiness and his mother’s recovery hung heavily in both their hearts. It would be a shame if they were to go to all this trouble only to have Brady’s brooding tantrums ruin their efforts and destroy Christmas for everyone.

I’ll not let that happen!

Charlotte donned a heavy wool dress and a pair of leather boots and shrugged into an ankle-length tweed coat, hoping her efforts would be enough to keep the chill at bay. If they weren’t, she was sharing her carriage with the most handsome man in all of Ireland, and she was sure she could convince him to keep her warm.

Once outside, Charlotte accepted Thomas’s helping hand as she stepped into the carriage, but his gloomy presence was impossible to ignore.

“Thomas, we are going into the village today, and while you understand you cannot come with us this time, I was wondering if you might have a letter for your ma? We can drop it by the doctor’s office on our way to the shipyard,” Charlotte offered. Her heart about nearly burst inside her chest when his blue eyes widened, and a smile emerged from beneath his heavy scowl.

“Ye mean it? I’ll have to run back inside and fetch it from Lady Violet, as she’d offered to deliver it for me t’morrow. Will ye wait ’til I run and get it right quick?” he asked excitedly, bouncing from foot to

foot.

Before she'd even had a chance to reply, her smile and a light nod were enough to have him sprinting across the yard and back toward the keep, where he'd nearly hurled into Liam in the doorway before disappearing inside.

Liam approached, pulling his gloves up across his knuckles. "What's gotten into him this morning?"

"He has a letter for his ma. He's gone inside to get it from Violet, of all people. He must've given it to her on the chance that Brady and she might go into the village. I had no idea they had become so well-acquainted in the past day." Shame welled up inside her for the jealousy that arose just thinking about Thomas confiding in someone other than herself. "Do you think perhaps Violet accidentally mentioned going into the village, and Thomas simply overheard her? Why wouldn't he ask me to bring a letter to his mother?"

"No worries, love. You still own the largest part of his heart," Liam chuckled as if he could read her mind.

Charlotte blew out a breath. "You certain?"

Liam nodded and stepped inside, settling alongside her, pulling the warm blanket across their thighs. His very nearness would be enough to have her scorching all the way into the village. "I know he loves you. I knew it back on that beach last year, and I know it now." Liam draped his arm around her shoulder. "This should keep us comfortable on our journey," he said, quite pleased with playing the doting husband. Charlotte would never tire of his affections or his commitment to her comfort.

Resting her head upon his shoulder and reaching around his middle, seeking the warmth beneath his wool carrick, she purred, "I have no worry about catching a chill, husband. I have it on good authority that love-making can generate enough heat to warm an entire home."

She felt Liam's chest pulse with a chuckle. "You are becoming a relentless vixen, Lady Kelly.

Charley swatted that glorious chest of his. "Do not admonish the beast you've created, Lord Kelly." If there was ever a time to be grateful he'd chosen the covered hansom versus the open curricle, it was now. Not only were they protected from the howling bite of a northerly wind, but also from the on-lookers who might bear witness to their devilish desires.

Thomas returned, holding the envelope in his hand. "If ye see 'er, tell 'er I miss her dearly."

Charlotte smiled, praying her meeting with the doctor went as planned and that they might return with the lad's mother before supper this very evening. "I will pass along the message if we are

lucky enough to catch the doctor. Rest assured, Thomas, we will leave your message upon his desk so he might deliver it for you."

Liam spoke then, gaining the boy's undivided attention; Liam was the lad's boss, after all. "Run along now, Thomas. The quicker you tend to your chores, the better. And for the love of all that's holy, please steer clear of Mary."

A light flush brightened his cheeks, but his excitement refused to waver. "Aye, sir. I'll not cause any trouble today. Ye can count on me."

"I know I can," Liam praised, and then Thomas broke into a full jog across the bailey toward the stables, where he no doubt had a chore list as long as his arm to complete before supper. Hopefully, he'd complete them without incident. After all, Mary was not a governess and had too much to worry about already running the household; she hadn't the time nor the patience to exhaust her energy on an unruly child.

Charlotte, however, was up to the task. While in the village, she planned to pick up some learning materials to start Thomas's schooling as soon as the holiday season concluded. There was no reason Liam shouldn't begin the boy's formal training. And Charlotte couldn't wait to get him started with lessons in hand-to-hand combat and perhaps some sword-play. Of course, she would have to find a private venue for those particular lessons, lest the house staff tire their tongues with all the wagging.

Liam tucked the lad's letter into his coat pocket and turned to Charlotte. The love behind his hazel gaze was enough to melt the ice of the Antarctic. "Let us pray the doctor has good news. The lad deserves it," Liam whispered, banged the side of the carriage to signal the driver, and then placed a kiss upon Charlotte's brow.

Nuzzling into his side, Charlotte replied, "He does. He's such a good boy, Liam. I wonder if we are doing him an injustice by having him work so very hard."

Liam pulled away a fraction, but only to smile down upon her. "Oh no you don't! The lad is not to be spoiled and coddled. Consider him our practice child. One day we will have boys of our own, and we will need to instill in them upstanding values and an outstanding work ethic. Thomas will work throughout the holiday, and then we shall begin his education."

Liam was right, a fact she could not deny. But the lure to spare the rod and spoil the child was one Charley had come by honestly, having been partly raised by her grandparents and her mother. She'd been granted everything she could dream of. It was only after her mother passed that she had been ripped from her grandmother's arms by her estranged father. His means of child-rearing were of the staunch

disciplinary form, lending to her comparison of the two methods and choosing the warmer one for Thomas. His mother's recovery could take months, and Charlotte was determined not to waste a moment of their time together with chores and menial tasks.

Charley sat up and met Liam eye to eye. "All right. I will agree that he shall have some chores. But I refuse to fill his days between his schoolwork and chores. He must be granted time to run and play and learn to fight," she insisted, watching his expression for signs of retreat or rebuke.

"Fight? For what reason does Thomas need to learn to fight?" he asked with a slight chuckle, his jovial tone indicating that he already knew the answer. "Feeling the need to spar, hmm?"

Charley leaned back and straightened the blanket over them again. "Maybe. Perhaps I should just use you as a sparring partner. But that will have to wait until we return home."

"Insufferable, Lady Kelly. Insufferable."

Charlotte stifled a giggle with a gloved hand and then craned her neck to peer outside. The village was now in view, and soon they would be arranging another carriage to transport Mrs. Brennan back to the keep. Charlotte was nearly bursting at the seams with the excitement this gesture was to bring about. A hired nurse could tend to her, leaving everyone else unburdened and Thomas free to visit as often as he needed. Not to mention that Thomas might finally cease his rabble-rousing and torture of poor Mary with his mother so close by.

When the carriage pulled to a stop outside the doctor's office door, Liam took Charlotte's hand in his and placed a kiss on the back. "No matter what happens today, remember that I love you. If she is too ill to travel, we shall inquire about setting up a Christmas Day visit. We'll push if we have to. It can only help the lad and perhaps even his mammy."

Charley nodded in agreement. The doctor's assessment often seemed over the top, and his measures were unnecessary, so if the Kellys were to save the lad's Christmas, they must stand on a united front. "I'm ready."

Liam helped her from the carriage, despite the driver's efforts to rush to their aid. Charlotte wondered why the Kellys didn't employ proper footmen and instead allowed whoever was on duty at the keep that day to fill the position. Perhaps things were done a little differently in Ireland, but she was learning.

Liam gently knocked on the door and shot Charlotte an encouraging smile, squeezing her hand. A moment later, the door swung wide, and the doctor appeared on the other side, his face forming a scowl, rubbing his hands in a washcloth.

“Lord and Lady Kelly, I’m surprised to see you both so soon. Did you bring the lad?” Dr. Regan asked, poking his head around the couple as if he were looking for Thomas. But why had he expected Thomas?

Liam took off his hat and took a step forward. “May we come in?”

The doctor rubbed the back of his neck, his ruddy face awash with concern. “Of course, come in.”

Charlotte followed Liam inside the office, a ball of dread forming in the pit of her stomach. Something was amiss here. The doctor’s demeanour was off, and the stench of death clung to the very air around them. It was an odour that never left you once it infiltrated your nostrils, and she’d experienced her share of death and decay while at sea. It was unmistakable. Someone had died here recently.

“Dr. Regan, has something happened?” Charlotte asked, her gaze scanning the space for an indication of recent trauma.

Dr. Regan’s brows shot up. “You mean you haven’t received my letter? I am not surprised. I told that good for nothing boy not to dawdle,” the doctor growled a sigh and took a seat behind his desk. “Could you both take a seat? I fear I have dreadful news.”

And there it was.

Mrs. Brennan would not be returning to the keep with them today or any other day. Even while the physician explained what had happened, Charlotte couldn’t bring herself to contemplate the words, but instead, her heart longed to go to Thomas and hold him tightly and never let him go. He was too young to lose his mother; her experience with that kind of pain was something Charlotte was all-too-familiar with.

Liam squeezed her hand, bringing her back from her wretched memories. Her tear-filled gaze met his, and for a split second, she wanted to crawl into his arms and let the pain wash over her. But Thomas needed her now more than ever.

“Love, did you understand what the doctor has said?” Liam asked quietly.

Charlotte sniffed, an attempt to pull herself together. “Yes. Her lungs filled with fluid, and there was nothing more to be done. I heard that. What I do not understand is how you missed it, Dr. Regan. You must have seen the woman was in distress! There must have been something you could have done!” Charlotte hadn’t intended to be so crass, as being a lady now meant she’d often have to bite her tongue. But old ways sometimes died hard, and what she wanted now more than anything was to beat the man into oblivion.

She envisioned him aboard the Devil’s Last Dance. She could almost feel the weight of her broadsword as it pierced into the man’s back as she led him to the capstan for punishment.

Liam spoke then, breaking her bloodlust. “You will have to excuse my wife, Doctor. As you can see, she is distraught. We have not received your correspondence, and now I fear we must make haste and return home. With any luck, we shall intercept your messenger. It would be best if Lady Kelly and I explained it to Thomas instead of some messenger lad.

“I will send someone tomorrow morning to help prepare Mrs. Brennan for burial. Charlotte?” Liam stood to leave, but Charley felt as though she were anchored in place.

The crush of sadness squeezed the air from her lungs. A grave-side burial and a service was a far cry different from a burial at sea. At sea, things were done much quicker with abrupt finality. But standing grave side, holding the hand of a sobbing boy, a boy she loved very much, threatened to haunt her for an eternity.

Her grandfather died when she was a young girl, leaving her grandmother completely bereft and quite nearly helpless. Julia, Charlotte’s mother, had made the necessary preparations for his burial, taking on the entire burden herself. While Charlotte hadn’t been old enough to understand what was happening, she had felt the impact of the sadness that had been left on her mother. Death left a boundless scar that would remain on a loved one’s heart forever.

She and Liam would have to ensure Thomas’s heart remained intact. With only a fortnight before Christmas Eve, she was unsure how she would do it. Losing his ma would forever leave a stain on his holiday spirit if everyone weren’t careful.

“Liam, please, let’s go home.” Charlotte’s request came on a whisper, the lump in her throat preventing her voice from breaking free. Already, she was exhausted.

The last they’d heard, Mrs. Brennan’s fever had broken. While she was still unable to care for Thomas properly and needed the time spent away from his shenanigans to recover fully, the prognosis had been favourable. What could have gone wrong?

Liam squeezed her shoulder and gave a quick nod to the doctor. “I shall return in a couple of days to settle up the bill.”

“Fine, m’lord. I’ll have the nurse go to Mrs. Brennan’s house and find a suitable dress for the poor dear. It’ll be here when your maid arrives to prepare her for eternal rest,” he replied, nervously wringing his fingers.

“Thank you. Good day to you,” Liam replied solemnly.

When they returned to the confines of the carriage, Charlotte finally let the waves of emotion wash over her like a tempest. With no one about to witness her sudden weakness, it was easy to let the tears fall, unconcerned with propriety, decorum or maintaining a façade of a pirate’s strength. A lump formed in her throat again, and she

couldn't quite swallow around the pain—a deep, burning pain for Thomas.

How would she ever be able to explain this away? How could she make him see that while his mother was no longer upon this green earth, that he still had people who deeply cared about him? Loved him, even. Despite that, Charlotte knew he would feel abandoned, a feeling she understood all too well. He would be angry and probably shut the world out, and if that happened, her and Liam's roles became that much harder. Patience was their only tool to help navigate these troubled waters.

Liam pulled her quivering body into his as if his stoicism might settle the eruption of emotions waging war inside her.

"Shh, love. We shall sit him down after dinner and explain it to him. Thomas is a tough lad. You'll see." While spoken with the best of intentions, Liam's words didn't quite reach Charlotte's heart. Thomas might be a thorny little devil on the outside, but this was going to crush him.

Charlotte sobbed, bringing a kerchief to her nose. "This is going to destroy him, Liam. I know it will. Don't you remember all those nights stranded on that beach? Thomas never failed to pray for his mammy, wishing he would see her again soon. He prayed for Murtagh and Quoyle to return with the treasure so he might change his and his mother's situation. Each and every night knelt beside his cot, his little hands wound tightly together with one mission: to send out prayers for that woman.

"What shall we tell him? That God doesn't listen? That he hadn't prayed hard enough?"

Liam shook his head, his mind clearly in as much turmoil as hers. "We will have to explain that sometimes these things happen, that there is no rhyme nor reason to God's plan. I hadn't always believed in these higher powers, but then you were sent to me. I've since become a believer."

Charlotte scoffed at his infallible assessment of the gods. "More like I pursued and ravaged your crew and ship. God had nothing to do with it."

She felt Liam chuckle beside her. "Perhaps you're right. But, would you agree that something inside you wanted to become a woman of morals and respectability? That something niggled at you to become the lady you are today?"

Charlotte gazed up into his adoring eyes. "Well, if I hadn't had some sort of transformation, I would have never made you fall in love with me."

"Higher power, my love. Perhaps it's not based upon God or Heaven, but love. Matters of the heart. Every day we will show

Thomas that above all else, he has our unconditional love."

It was really that simple, wasn't it? Yes, the lad would no doubt be heartbroken, but hers and Liam's love would help him through it.

Chapter Five

By some small miracle, they caught up with the messenger lad just outside the gatehouse. Liam retrieved the letter and tucked it inside his coat pocket to be burned at a later time. Right now, Thomas was still oblivious and probably causing a ruckus somewhere—with his heart intact.

Charlotte rushed inside the manor, discarding her coat and gloves onto the large table standing in the foyer. Before she could even call out to Thomas, Liam's hand grasped her forearm, halting her in her tracks.

"We mustn't be rash, love. We must handle this correctly. If you're not up to it, I can sit him down in the study myself and have a long yet kind discussion," he offered, his brows knit with concern. He had a right to be concerned. The happy little world she had created for herself seemed to be crumbling before her eyes.

All she had wanted was a perfect first Christmas with Liam, one that filled the home with joy and laughter. Instead, what she had been left with were brothers who couldn't stand to look at one another, worry over the missing Mannings and a youngster who had just lost everything he had ever known. How could this get any worse?

As if the universe intended to answer that very question in the most nefarious manner, a knock came upon the door. Instead of waiting for the butler, Mr. Harrow, to make his way from whichever corner of the kitchen he was eating Mary's fresh-baked treats, Charlotte rushed and pulled it open.

Standing there on the threshold to make matters much worse were the newly wedded Murtaghs. Not that she wasn't happy to see Morgan and Fiona, but their arrival was very much unexpected and would cause more of a stir than it was worth.

"Fiona. Morgan. How lovely it is to see you both. Come in," Charlotte cooed, keeping her tone even and the anxious pang in her chest from exploding.

Fiona reached out and grasped Charlotte's hands. "I know we're late, and I would have arranged to come sooner, but ye know what Da can be like. He wanted the last batch of ale aboard the ship before we made the journey, like he couldn't do it himself," she mocked with a

roll of her eyes. “I know it was a ruse to keep us there longer.”

“Yes, well…” Charlotte began, but Morgan’s deep brogue interrupted her.

“Ach, lass. Ye can stop feelin’ bad about leavin’ ’im there all alone. Ye know he’s been sneakin’ around with the widow from down the road. Ol’ Paddy is far from alone this Christmas,” Morgan chuckled. Turning to Charlotte, he removed his cap, offered her a polite nod. “Charley.” Then he turned to Liam, who had still refused to speak. “Little lord. I apologize for our late arrival. When I received yer invitation, I thought to come straight away, but I fear this little imp has kept me very busy turnin’ the tavern into a right dandy spot. Had to be sure it was well-taken care of while we’re away.”

Charlotte turned and faced Liam with a wave of anger unlike she had ever known bubbling from beneath her blouse, the heat of it scorching her already hot cheeks and at this point, she cared little if their guests bore witness to it.

Taking her broiled gaze as a cue, Liam cleared his throat and said, “I’ll have Mr. Harrow show you to your room. Supper will be at six, and I hope you will join us. Right now, you will have to excuse us; we have some important business to conduct in the study. Make yourselves at home, roam the grounds, filch a biscuit from the kitchen.” Even before Morgan could reply, Liam had started toward the study, leaving Charley to follow after him like a dim-witted puppy.

“Thank ye, little lord. Don’t mind if I do,” Morgan replied, ushering his new bride up the stairs after the spindly Mr. Harrow.

Charlotte couldn’t understand why the Kellys had kept the antique around for so long. Mr. Harrow would be better suited perhaps if he were living out what life he had left in the comfort of his own home, surrounded by family. But there were more pressing matters to discuss at the moment than the uselessness of an elderly manservant.

Charlotte stormed off to the right, toward the study after Liam, and once behind closed doors, she turned and faced him, her tongue full of venom and her mind coiled in outrage. “How could you invite them and not tell me?”

“I did tell you! Three days ago, I told you! And why would you *not* want them here to share the holidays with us? It’s been a prosperous year for our family, and that wouldn’t have happened without either of them!”

Charlotte paced the floor, unable to decide whether to pummel him or perhaps just wring his neck. At the same time, her brain struggled to conjure the memory of him informing her of extra guests. Pointing a finger into his chest, she spat, “No, I do not remember you telling me! You know how Morgan being here is going to affect Quoyle! How could you be so careless?”

“I believe Quoyle will handle having the Murtaghs here for the holidays. He doesn’t even come down to the keep since he took up residence in the game warden’s lodge. And you think *I’m* careless?” Liam scoffed, rather ungentlemanly. “If you hadn’t been so wrapped up in stripping this place to its bones, perhaps you would have heard me when I told you!” Liam swept his arms wide, driving his point home. The changes she’d made had damn near erased the Kellys from the space, and even though he seemed incensed by it all of a sudden, Charlotte couldn’t find it inside herself to feel bad. This was now her home, too; it was time for the interior to reflect her background as well.

“Well, someone has to breathe some fucking life into the place! It’s like a God-damn mortuary,” she countered, her hands firmly upon her hips, lest she resort to physical violence. “Hundreds of years of deceased clan folk shrines scattered about!”

Liam, it seemed, could keep his cool for only so long, and she knew as soon as the words left her mouth that she’d made a terrible blunder.

“True colours shining through tonight, my dear? Do I have to fetch a bar of soap to clean that filthy mouth of yours? I’ll not stand for such profanity. You’re supposed to be a lady of good standing now, not some barbarian.” They were toe to toe now, and Liam’s breath skated across her face, the heat and anger saturating the air around them—unexpected behaviour for her usual calm and reserved husband.

Charlotte threw her hands up. “There’s no use talking to you. You’ll never understand what it feels like for everything you have ever known to be ripped from you in one fell swoop. I lost the only family and home I have ever known. All I wanted was to bring some of the sea with me.” Tears had begun to sting her eyes as a wash of unwanted emotion threatened to upend everything she had ever believed about herself. When had she become so soft? “And don’t talk to me about behaving like a proper lady! I thought my wicked ways were what caused your loins to tighten and your heart to go all aflutter. No trouble to see where your priorities lay now, *Lord* Kelly.” She pinned him with a disapproving glare, certain he would feel shame for the once wanton desires brewing beneath his perfectly placed cravat.

Liam’s fists clenched and loosened by his sides, no doubt aching to throw a facer her way. Had he been the eldest Kelly, she supposed he might have—brooding youngster that Brady was.

The malice in her words was enough to force him to check himself. Taking a deep, exhausted breath, he exhaled slowly and shook his head. “What are we doing? We are supposed to be discussing Thomas.

I know your heart is broken over what we must do, but the last thing we need to be doing is turning on each other.

"Morgan and Quoyle will get along just fine." Liam reached out and pulled her into his arms, and despite her best efforts to push him away, her body, of its own volition, melted into his. "They did work quite well as a team when we helped Morgan with his O'Cuinn problem, remember? They were real grown-ups about it and cast their animosity aside. I'm sure they'll do the same during the holidays, especially when they realize Thomas's spirit depends on it."

Just like that, in the blink of an eye, Charlotte's spiteful disposition dissolved into a puddle of pure love. How could one man possess such charms as to diffuse a dastardly situation so quickly?

Charlotte sighed. Liam was right. Wasn't he always? He was the most level-headed person she knew. Quoyle and Morgan would carry on just fine. Brady and Liam would get through the holidays too. And whatever was keeping the Mannings, she was sure she would receive word soon. The most important thing that should be on everyone's minds was Thomas and getting him through Christmas with as little scars as possible. With only having seen twelve winters, his mind couldn't possibly understand the inner workings of these selfish adults.

"All right. I give up for now. But the first word of contention spoken between the lot of you, Thomas and I will be running for the hills. We'll check into The Haven, I swear it. I hear the new owners have quite nicely picked up where the last owner left off," she chuckled. There had been rumours that a new mistress had bought the manor from the county since the previous madam died. While Charlotte was still relatively new to these parts, it didn't take long for tongues to wag about how the brothel's new reputation was holding up to the old. Mary had gossiped about Mrs. Welsh over on Raleigh Row, a devout Christian woman of impeccable standing, who only last week caught her husband leaving there with his shirt-tails untucked, and his hair all mussed about.

Liam extended his arms, his hands still fixed about her shoulders, his brows knit in a severe and serious fashion, despite her jesting. "You must never, and I mean never, talk about The Haven, especially in Jack Manning's presence. Do you understand?"

Charley was lost for words. He looked as though it was a matter of life and death to keep the gossip surrounding the brothel under wraps.

"I…of course. But can I ask why?" She raised her hands and placed them upon his chest. How could she even think about poking that magnificent chest of his? Pummel him? She couldn't.

Liam pulled away, walking to the window. Charlotte worried over the creases of emotion on his face in the reflection of the glass. What could cause such a severe change in him? Then he turned. "Jack had a

close connection to the place. The former mistress was a dear friend and…confidante. But if you ask me, the woman was a saint. She died trying to protect Jack's wife, Kylee," he explained, almost wistfully. "Emma, I believe her name was. The woman was murdered in a brutal, brutal fashion, Charley. So naturally, we wouldn't want to dredge up painful memories for Jack," he explained, his voice low and his tone even.

Charlotte's hand flew to her mouth. Never again would she entertain the gossip hounds, lending an ear to their vicious tittle-tattle. "Oh, Liam. That is dreadful. I'll never bring it up again. If I ever see the Mannings again, that is. I wish I knew what was keeping them. I'm beginning to worry."

"You and me, both. But, no time for that now; we've more important matters to take care of," he said, all business again, now that their spat had passed, taking some of the pain out of Charlotte's heart. Curious how a little bit of drama with the threat of violence could right her inner ship.

"Agreed." Charley reached up and kissed his cheek as a sign of apology, and Liam returned it with a loving smile.

"I think it's best if we inform the adults of Mrs. Brennan's passing so they'll be prepared if the lad asks questions or needs a shoulder." Liam sat down at his desk and straightened the papers, even though everything seemed to be precisely where it ought to be. Charlotte supposed it was a fine way to keep his hands busy.

"I'll ring for tea and have Mary summon Brady, Violet and the Murtaghs. Shall I ring for Quoyle as well?" she asked, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, ready to take on the world.

Liam cleared his throat and pinned her with an earnest stare. Resting his chin upon steepled fingers, he asked, "You sure do like to ring those old bells, don't you?"

Charlotte grinned. "Yes, I suppose I do. My grandmama's house had them. We had a large staff at one time, and with the pull of a rope, all your wants and needs were met," she explained.

Liam leaned back in his chair, a pregnant pause passing before he spoke again. "Would you mind fetching Brady, Violet and the Murtagh's yourself? I'll go and find Quoyle. Once everyone's been notified, we can talk to Thomas after supper. As for now, I think if the lad is under Mary's feet, it's a right better place than here, just yet."

Charlotte nodded. "All right, my love. But I'm sure if Mary is busy, she could send Mr. Harrow."

"And I'm sure we can take care of it ourselves," Liam countered as he quickly stood and made his way toward the door, ushering her along.

Why were the occupants of this house so repulsed by accepting the

help they paid for? It was such madness. Surely, they could save a small fortune by cutting the staff loose, seeing as they're all determined to do things on their own.

Charlotte found Brady and Violet in the solar, and she couldn't help the slight pang of loss at the absence of her ship's replica. The space seemed so cold and utilitarian now. Sitting on the floor, a toddling tot wobbled on shaky legs between them. Even though Charlotte had only met her nephew during a few short visits in the past few months, pride filled her chest at the boy's tenacity and determination to become a two-legged, baby wrecking ball. *One…two…come on, take a third. You can do it!*

His little rump landed on the floor with a thump, and instead of a sulky wail, the child giggled and resorted to crawling the rest of the way to his mother. Violet picked him up and squeezed him tightly, offering words of encouragement. For the very first time in her life, Charlotte ached to know a child's love—to feel the unconditional affection and bond between mother and babe.

She and Liam had been married for nearly a year, and despite all their spontaneous explorations of the flesh, they had yet to conceive Liam's heir. Charlotte's palm rested upon her empty womb, a sudden wash of emotion catching in her throat. Suddenly, her melancholy invocation to the heavens was interrupted when Brady spoke.

"Lady Charlotte. Come in, join us. Yer nephew is a quick study. He'll be wreakin' havoc all o'er the place in no time. Would ye like to hold his hands while he practices?" Brady asked thoughtfully, uncharacteristically thoughtfully, Charlotte noted.

Violet released her grip on the babe, stood him up with his fists wrapped around her fingers. With a generous grin, Violet helped him approach Charley until there was no distance between them, and his hands had transferred their trust to her fingers to keep him upright.

"I think he really likes ye, Charlotte," Violet assured with a glint of happiness and pride dancing in her eyes.

Charlotte couldn't form the words due to the lump in her throat. So many emotions were storming through her today, and with good cause. Remembering her purpose, she picked up Sean, kissed his cherub cheek and passed him back to his mother.

"Might you and Lord Kelly…"

"Please, we are family. I think first names will suffice," Brady interrupted, but not at all unkindly. It seemed Brady Kelly was at his best when in the company of babes.

"Yes, of…of course," Charlotte stammered and then turned back to Violet as it was easier to talk to her than her intimidating husband. "Will you both join Liam and me in the study? There is an important matter we must discuss."

Brady and Violet exchanged a puzzled glare.

"Aye. We'll be along shortly," Brady replied, relieving Violet of her heavy yet precious cargo.

Charlotte nodded and quit the room in search of Morgan and Fiona. With a light knock on their guestroom door, she leaned close to hear if they were inside. Clearly, she'd interrupted something when the melody of giggles and hushed conversation came from within.

"Morgan? May I speak to you, please?" she called at the solid mahogany.

A deep rumble of laughter later, and the door swung open, Morgan's shirt unbuttoned nearly to his navel. Just behind him, Fiona was straightening her blouse and fussing over her flame-red curls. There was no guessing what these two were doing before Charlotte disrupted them.

Adverting her gaze, Charley tried to focus on the wall sconce, which was yet to be ignited for the evening.

"Lord Kelly and I request an audience in the study as soon as you… that is…as soon as possible, if you will. It is a matter of great importance," she requested, the heat of embarrassment rising in her cheeks as she forced herself to meet his gaze.

Morgan scrubbed at his beard, which had grown out a great deal since she'd last seen him. He reminded her of the first time she had met him aboard the Caitlyn's Fancy. He appeared much older then and somewhat menacing, standing over six feet tall with a broad, stocky build, with never a hint of humour in his gaze. As she faced him now in the doorway, he seemed to be much younger with a mischievous glint dancing in his eyes. Married life indeed agreed with him.

"Ach, lass. Already? We've only just begun…umm…unpackin'." He smirked, the corner of his mouth lifting devilishly.

Charlotte cast a glance up and down the hall to be sure no one was within earshot and whispered, "Make haste, Morgan. We have to discuss Thomas."

He must've caught the worried tone in her voice or the sadness in her eyes because as soon as Charlotte spoke, his smile faded, and his shoulders fell.

"What's the lad gotten himself into? Is he all right, Charley?" he asked, buttoning his shirt, his jovial countenance dissolving.

Charlotte laid her hand upon his forearm. "Just please hurry."

"Aye, lass. We'll be down in a few minutes." Morgan closed the door, all business and seriousness now. There was no doubt that where Thomas was concerned, Morgan would not dally.

Charlotte made her way back to the study and took a seat in one of the soft leather chairs against the wall. Liam had yet to return with

Quoyle, but as she smoothed her skirts over her thighs, Brady and Violet entered.

"The babe was ready to take his nap after all his excitement today. The world must appear so different in his little mind, going from a crawl to standing on two feet," Violet beamed proudly.

Brady took a seat behind the desk, and Charlotte couldn't help but think how strange he looked there. Like the space was the last place on earth he should be.

That seat was reserved for Liam. It was where he conducted business, where he made decisions, keeping all the neighbouring families happy and the business cogs turning. Even though Brady was the eldest and the heir, the job of running the day-to-day operations of Kelly and Ryan's Shipwrights no longer belonged to him. She wondered what Liam would say when he returned to his desk and found he did not have a seat there.

Of course, he would say nothing. He was too honourable a man.

Violet settled into the chair next to Charlotte and leaned in as if she were about to say something, but just then, Morgan entered, holding Fiona's hand.

He walked her to the chair on the other side of Charley, kissing her hand before releasing it.

"Fiona, I take you found everything in your room to your liking?" Charlotte asked. "If you need anything at all, do not hesitate to ring for Mary or even Mr. Harrow. They'll take care of you," she added. Fiona smiled kindly.

Violet snorted.

Charlotte turned quickly, narrowing her gaze on her sister-in-law, whose nose had risen to haughty heights.

"Whatever you have on your mind, you can save for later, Lady Kelly. Now is not the time," Charlotte snipped.

Violet offered a fake smile and replied, "Nay. Of course not, *Lady Kelly*."

Charlotte struggled to ignore the thick thread of tension stretching between them and instead turned her sights on Morgan.

"Murtagh, would you be a dear and go in search of my husband? I sent him to the game warden's lodge to fetch Quoyle," Charlotte asked, fidgeting with the hem of her sleeve. She wanted this meeting to be over so they could deliver the news to Thomas and begin the healing process.

"That will not be necessary, my love," came a voice from the doorway.

"Liam. Did you find Quoyle?" she asked, craning her neck to search for her oldest, dearest friend behind her husband.

This was going to be a difficult day, harder than when her father

had died. That mean old bastard had only shown her indifference, and she'd never really known his love. But Charlotte loved Thomas, and she was forced to break his little heart. She needed Quoyle's support more today than she had all those years ago.

No more were the words out of her mouth when she heard Quoyle's heavy gait approaching in the hallway. Charlotte sighed with relief.

"'Course I'm here, Cap'n. Err…I mean, that is, Charley," Quoyle replied and closed the door behind him.

Charlotte smiled at him, but the expressions on the faces around the room were enough to freeze hell straight over—except for Liam, that is. He'd long accepted Quoyle, and they'd even become friends. Brady and Morgan were obviously having a tougher time of it.

Without a negative word, Liam dragged a chair from the wall and placed it next to Brady's behind the desk. Charlotte was genuinely proud of him for refusing to take Brady to task over the triviality of sitting in his seat. *Perhaps, I'm the petty one.* Charlotte chewed in the inside of her cheek, realizing how disturbed her thoughts were at such a time as this.

When everyone was finally seated, Brady cleared his throat, no doubt feeling the crush of tension as well. "What's this about, brother?"

Liam drew in a long breath and turned to him. "Have you acquainted yourself with the little fellow that we have staying here?"

"Aye, met the little scamp just this mornin'. Cheeky one, if ye ask me." Brady scowled. *My my, but he is in a foul mood again.*

Liam turned his sights on Charley, perhaps praying she would rescue him from having to say the words, but continued before she had the chance, "Well, it looks as though he will be with us indefinitely. His mother passed away last evening.

"We haven't had a chance to sit him down yet and explain it, but we wanted you all to know what's going on. The lad's behaviour has been deplorable as of late, and I fear this will only boost his troubles and defiance of authority. I'll need, that is," he said, his apprehensive and worrisome gaze boring into hers, "*we* shall need everyone's understanding and patience where the lad is concerned."

Morgan rose from his chair so swiftly, the back of it slammed against the wall.

"We gotta go and find 'im. Ye know how close he is to 'is mammy. This is gonna gut the poor lad," he exclaimed, his brows shooting up into his hairline.

Liam cast him an understanding glance yet shook his head. "No, my friend. Charlotte and I will tell him tonight, after dinner. In private."

Charlotte scanned the room, gauging the reactions from her guests. It seemed this wouldn't be a very merry holiday after all, with how

Quoyle was pacing frantically—quite understandable given the fact that he and Thomas had history at sea.

Violet was weeping into a kerchief, still unable to form her condolences and support, and Miss Fiona couldn't pull her eyes away from Morgan, no doubt, his heartache seeping into hers. Charlotte surmised the woman was ready to leap into his arms at any moment but was holding onto every thread of resistance she possessed. She was so very grateful that Morgan Murtagh had found happiness with a woman who was as good and kind as he was. It was a future he deserved.

Charlotte hiccupped on the sob wedged in her throat. "When we invited you all here, it was to mend friendships and families, to celebrate Christmas together. With this turn of events, we would understand if you chose to leave," she sniffled. "But we hope you will decide to stay, as I believe Thomas needs each of you around him to get through this."

"Aye, I agree, lass. I'm not goin' nowhere," Morgan said, raking his fingers through his dark auburn hair.

"Nay, Cap'n. I'm only across the bailey, and my door is always open for ye both," Quoyle added.

Violet stood and went to stand behind Brady. With her hands upon his shoulders, she looked down at Liam. "Whatever ye need from us, Liam, we are here. We can stay as long as you need us." Then she smiled at Charley, a genuine kind of smile, one that emitted empathy, concern and understanding.

Charlotte rose from her seat, the heaviness in her heart making putting one foot in front of the other more difficult than it ought to be. "It is settled then. We shall have supper, keeping the conversations light and friendly, no matter what's on anyone's minds. Do you understand?"

All parties nodded their agreement, and while they all seemed to be on the same page, Charlotte doubted they could sit through an entire meal without wanting to cut one another's throats.

Chapter Six

Once safely back behind closed doors, Fiona fell into Morgan's arms. It was all just too much to bear. The thought of that poor little boy losing his mother at such a young age tore the heart clean out of her chest. The fact that her own mother had died bringing her into the world was indeed a blessing of sorts. Fiona couldn't miss something she'd never had.

But Thomas did have a ma. A woman who'd raised, clothed and fed him. A woman who no doubt rubbed salve on each and every scrape, even if the most efficient ointment was her love. A woman he would forever pine over. Fiona couldn't imagine how fierce the bond between a mother and her child could be. Even though she'd had a father who had played both parts, it just wasn't the same.

"Shh, Fiona. Don't cry, love," Morgan whispered, gently stroking her hair.

Fiona gazed up into the most loving and warm brown eyes. Marrying him was long overdue and the best mistake she had ever made.

"I was just thinkin' about yer little lad, Thomas, is all. He's going to be devastated. And here we all have to sit and sup with him, pretending his entire world hasn't just crumbled," she sobbed.

Morgan held her a little tighter, the steady thrum of his heartbeat like a balm to her heartache. Lifting her chin, he smiled down and wiped a stray tear away.

"Don't fret. Liam and Charley have this well in hand. They'll explain it in a way he'll understand. And aye, supper may be difficult but nothin' compared to what he must endure following it," he soothed. "All this talk of mothers and death must leave ye feelin' a little muddled, aye? Ye mightn't have known a mother's love, darlin', but ye've been blessed with a father who tried so very hard. And ye have the most dashing husband a lass could ask for. Ye're well acquainted with love." Morgan winked and grinned, exposing that dimple in his cheek, making her melt into a puddle of mush.

Fiona loved him fiercely at that moment. He understood her better than anyone ever had, and he possessed an uncanny ability to put her mind at ease. Aye, she'd been lucky to be reunited with this man of

hers.

"Let's get ready for supper," he said, his hands tangling in her hair. "Wear that pretty frock I bought ye after we married, the fancy blue one," he added and then placed a tender kiss on her lips, his feather-light touch making her toes curl. Oh, how he tasted divine! The heat of his kiss lingered long after he pulled away and went to the wardrobe to pick out a fresh, fancy shirt of his own.

Not long after, she gave herself one last check in the mirror, hooked her arm through Morgan's, and left the room behind.

Fiona was unfamiliar with the proper etiquette of dining in a grand hall, but one thing was certain—it was best if she and Morgan waited for the others to come downstairs before proceeding to the dining room. Never one to miss an opportunity to familiarize herself with her surroundings, she wandered about the foyer, taking in the love and care that had gone into making the space festive for the holidays. Such a shame that a dark cloud would soon descend upon the entire household, making the laurel and ivy seem wilted and withered.

Reaching out and grasping Morgan's calloused hand in hers for extra fortitude, she examined a nautically inspired painting of a grand ship being swallowed by the tumultuous seas. It was how she envisioned her presence in this magnificent manor.

Tonight she would dine with two proper ladies. Fiona was merely a bar wench and a country wife. Why hadn't she thought of that before? Why had she even agreed to encroach on their family celebrations? Aye, she should have stayed home in Ennis with Paddy. Her father needed her more than he wanted to admit. She squeezed Morgan's hand as desperation and regret engulfed her.

He turned, gazing down on her. "'Tis beautiful, isn't it? We had some weather like that on our trip across the Atlantic with your ale. It was how Charley was able to wreck us. She was a brilliant captain," he said almost longingly, his eyes narrowing on the canvas of oily blues and greys. "She used every element known to man to outwit us and drive us ashore."

Fiona scrunched up her nose at that. "Brutal and crass if ye ask me." Had she really said that aloud? She must not judge too harshly after all that Charlotte had done for her. Charley had been instrumental in saving her from Kane O'Cuinn's evil clutches, and it would be in poor taste to judge the woman on her past crimes. Charlotte was kind and good as far as Fiona knew, and she'd not allow tales of misadventures at sea to sway her personal opinion now.

Morgan chuckled and turned his attention to the top of the staircase. "Perhaps, love. But as ye can see, she's a far cry from that now." He nodded toward the couple descending the stairs, seemingly caught up in their own private conversation.

Charlotte had traded her heavy wool dress for a lacy, yellow gown with a high neckline and matching white gloves, the soft glow from the wall sconce highlighting curly strands of caramel hair that fell past her bosom. To some degree, Fiona was grateful. In pleasing her husband, she had indeed worn the extravagant blue gown as he'd requested, and she had been terribly worried of being overdressed. However, it seemed her husband had a keen knowledge and understanding of how folks should dress for supper in a grand home such as this. Again, Morgan proved to be her saviour. Fiona fit in just fine.

Liam carried himself like a real gentleman she'd only read about in some of her fanciful novels. Not surprisingly, nobility dripped from him. Morgan had once told her that Liam had attended school in London while Brady had stayed here at home—that one simple fact had made them as different as the sun and moon, night and day.

"I should think you would be in the hall already, sitting comfortably with a glass of wine, while you waited for us," Charlotte said, reaching the bottom step. "In case you're unsure of how we do things here, it would have been perfectly fine had you done so." Her warm smile reached her eyes, and Fiona felt completely at ease, if even for the moment.

Fiona would have liked to have been better acquainted with Charlotte and perhaps even work alongside her. However, when she and Charlotte had first met, it had been under perilous circumstances, and the two hadn't been able to form any kind of bond. Sending Charlotte into O'Shea's brewery hadn't been a part of anyone's plan to rescue Fiona from Kane O'Cuinn, but the cunning and brave woman had selflessly volunteered.

Unfortunately, Kane's hired assassin had thwarted Charlotte's efforts, earning her a life-threatening injury in the process. Fiona shivered at the memory but forced herself to toss it aside. Kane O'Cuinn would never own a moment of her thoughts again.

Morgan leaned in. "Everything all right?" he whispered.

Fiona realized Charlotte was still talking, and despite being completely unaware she was even moving, she had reached the dining hall without having heard a word.

Picking up his cue, she stammered, "I…I'm fine." Fiona threw on a smile, stuffing down her many insecurities, and politely nodded as if she'd been listening.

When they reached the hall, Brady and Violet were already seated, sipping on what could only be whiskey, judging by the amber hue in the glass. They seemed so at ease, so engulfed in one another's respective orbits. Perhaps they were always that way. But feeling so very out of her element, Fiona was eager to go home without ever

finding out.

Thomas came charging in shortly after, followed by Quoyle, who Fiona had only briefly met when offering her gratitude for all these people had done to help her and Morgan. While Quoyle's expression that day had been kind and gentle, right now, he was swearing up a storm of his own with his fist raised in the air.

"Ye little devil! Next time I catch ye takin' the shears to them sheep, I'll have yer hide!" he hollered. Instead of the outburst resulting in Thomas receiving a thorough punishment from Liam or Charlotte, a cacophony of laughter and giggles broke out all around the room. The lad could practically get away with murder with these people today. From the little Fiona did know about Quoyle, he'd been the disciplinarian aboard Charlotte's ship, and there was no way Thomas would have walked away from his sheep-shearing shenanigans without a sore arse.

"Everyone, take a seat. Mary has prepared a delicious meal for us tonight, Thomas's favourite—roasted chicken and turnips," Charlotte announced, settling into her seat.

Morgan pulled out Fiona's chair and then lowered into the one across from her. How she had wished he was next to her, for if things became uncomfortable, at least he would be there to soothe her nerves with the slightest touch.

Seated around this large table with people who were most definitely not her own was exhausting. They chatted about the weather, about how Violet's young son had been faring since they left the cottage, giving Violet a necessity to apologize for all the late-night wailing and walking the floors.

Fiona yearned for Liam to strike up business conversations. That was a subject she had extensive knowledge in. She had no care for the weather—it was winter, cold was to be expected. And as for all the talk of babies, that subject only made her womb scream from emptiness. Having children had been a long-forgotten dream, and she wondered if she were still able to one day have a family of her own. Surely, she wasn't too old, was she?

She looked up, and her gaze caught Morgan's, and she breathed a little easier. He was her hero, and if there were any way possible of making a family, he'd see to it that it was done just to please her.

"Fiona, you must tell us what married life has been like for you and Murtagh. Has he been boring you with tales of heroics at sea?" Charlotte asked beside her, probably sensing her discomfort.

Quoyle snorted and downed his drink. "Heroics! Murtagh, a hero! Bah!

Fiona shot daggers across the table but reminded herself she was in the company of strangers. "He has regaled me with a tale or two, but

I'm afraid, he leaves out the dangerous parts." There, that was polite enough. She must not voice a brazen retort, no matter how much she wanted to spew foul words to shut him up. She grinned and took another small bite of her supper.

Charlotte sucked in a loud breath beside her, no doubt eager for this meal to be over so she and Liam could have a sit down with Thomas. It seemed everyone was on pins and needles—everyone apart from Thomas. He'd been gorging himself on the roasted chicken, apparently too hungry to pay any attention to the adults, a small blessing, such that it was.

Charlotte held up a finger, signalling Mr. Harrow. He leaned down, and she whispered something, and then he pulled a rope on the far wall. Within minutes, that lovely housemaid who had fussed about her chamber earlier appeared, carrying a large tray of desserts. She set them down on a sideboard, gave a slight curtsy and made a swift exit. Fiona had never been in the company of such grandeur in her life; it was intoxicating yet unsettling.

"I see ye still haven't given much thought on how the house staff are to be treated, Charlotte," Violet snipped, and while her smile seemed amiable enough, her cheeks were rosy, and there was a hint of displeasure in her tone. Fiona felt like she was sitting in the eye of a brewing storm. In truth, she'd felt that way since she and Morgan arrived. It had been such a mistake coming here.

"I have nothing to change my mind about, Violet. Staff are staff. Family are family," came Charlotte's reply through a spoonful of orange pudding. "It is imprudent to confuse the two."

Fiona passed on the dessert when Mr. Harrow attempted to place one in front of her. It seemed she had lost her appetite.

Violet sniffed the air and nodded toward Thomas, who was now wolfing down his own bowl of pudding. Charlotte took the hint and snapped her mouth shut, the retort she was sure to let loose, hovering between them. This argument would wait, it seemed, and Fiona couldn't be more grateful.

When at last the meal had concluded, instead of the men heading into the study for cigars and brandy, Morgan and Fiona bid them all a good night and retreated to their chamber. Once they were again safely behind closed doors, Fiona fell into his arms.

"I thought that would never end. Please, remind me why we're here? All of ye hate one another." Holding onto his shirt collar seemed to offer her some comfort, as did breathing in his masculine, woodsy scent. However, she missed the aroma of hops and barley that usually clung to his clothes, and she was surprised that they were all but non-existent after only being away from home a short time.

Morgan released her from his warm embrace. Holding her face in

his big, burly hands, he placed a soft kiss on her lips, stirring things inside her she had only recently discovered. Searing heat shot straight to her core, and suddenly, the past two hours seemed inconsequential. Threading her fingers in his hair, she pulled him deeper into the blistering kiss, tasting and exploring his mouth with her tongue. He tasted like her own signature pale ale; he tasted divine.

Pulling away quickly, Morgan gave her a mischievous look.

"Off with that gown," he grumbled, holding his finger up in a circular motion. "Let's make ye forget that dinner. Forget that ye're here amongst strangers. Make ye remember how much I love ye, 'cause that's all that matters, Fiona. And don't be frettin' o'er the young fella. Liam and Charley will take care o' him. Let me take care o' ye."

Fiona was already reaching for the buttons behind her before he'd finished speaking, and when her hands fumbled on the ones she couldn't reach, she turned and let him free the rest of them.

His mouth found that delicate and sensitive spot on the back of her neck, causing her to shiver as he moved the fabric down her trembling body. Goosebumps travelled down her arms in succession with his mouth; his calloused hands caused her soul to sing, to cry out in a harmony of heat and lust.

Turning in his arms as her dress fell to the floor, she gazed up at him. His breathing had hitched up a notch, no doubt as anxious as she was to put this day behind them and to tangle themselves into their own little web of desire.

Morgan bent slightly and lifted her high into his arms, her bare breasts flush with the scratchy fabric still covering his chest. Her nipples hardened instantly, and an ache gathered between her thighs.

Carrying her to the bed, Morgan tossed her atop it with a low, rumbling chuckle as he, too, rid himself of his clothing. Fiona and Morgan had been married for nearly half a year, but each time she was fortunate enough to gaze at him in all his nude glory, it was like the first time. While his clothes usually masked what lay beneath, she always anticipated the unveiling of hard muscle and sinew.

He crawled atop the bed, hovering over her like she were prey, taking his good, sweet time worshipping her with kisses from her toes to the junction of her thighs. Aye, indeed, if the world were crumbling at this moment, it would be the last thing on Fiona's mind.

She fisted his hair, her body writhing beneath his delicate and determined teasing. Then suddenly and quickly, the heat he'd built within her exploded into stars and lights behind her lids.

"Let's see if this time I can put a babe in ye," he said, inching up until his shaft reached her wet, ready heat. With just one slow thrust, she'd found heaven in his arms.

“Aye,” she panted. “This time. If not, I do enjoy the practice.”

“Couldn’t agree with ye more.”

Lovemaking had such an ability to make one forget about anything outside their sanctuary of themselves. Fiona was never so grateful.

Chapter Seven

After the other guests had left the hall, Charlotte let Thomas help himself to an extra serving of pudding.

"Did ye take the letter to the doc?" he asked between mouthfuls—good heavens how this lad could eat.

Charlotte looked to Liam for guidance. This was the perfect opportunity to explain things to him. She watched in silence as his blue eyes sparkled with the mention of the doctor, no doubt anxious to hear a report on his mother's health.

Liam cleared his throat. "Thomas. We did, in fact, meet with the doctor today, and I fear we have some dreadful news. Put down your spoon, lad."

Thomas's gaze danced between Liam and Charlotte's. "She's gettin' worse, ain't she? I'm not gonna be able to see her Christmas mornin', am I?" he asked, slowly placing the spoon next to his bowl. He appeared ready to bolt from the room, and Charlotte nodded to Mr. Harrow, who had been waiting for the guests to vacate so he might begin to clean up. Mr. Harrow moved to the side a little as if he'd understood Charley's instruction to catch the lad if he attempted to run away from this horrible conversation.

Charlotte moved closer to Thomas and sat down, taking his hands in hers.

"No, child. You will not be able to spend Christmas with your ma. You see, Thomas, your mother's lungs filled with fluid, and by the time the doctor reached the house to attend to her, she was already gone," Charlotte explained, gently squeezing his hands, rubbing his tender flesh with her thumbs. Perhaps he might find some strength in her embrace.

Thomas turned, searching Liam's gaze for understanding. "Gone? Where would she have gone?" he squeaked. "I have to go and find her." Thomas threw his napkin onto his setting and tried to stand, but Charlotte's grip held firm, keeping him in place.

"No, Thomas. She hasn't gone anywhere in the physical sense. She passed away peacefully in her sleep. She died, my love." Charlotte's heart broke into a million tiny shards, watching as his brain struggled to compute. His eyes glistened with the tears he refused to shed and

his lower lip quivered with the questions he could not bear to ask.

Liam rose from his seat and knelt at his side. “I know this is hard for you to understand, so if you have any questions, we will tell you anything you want to know,” he assured and then pinned Charley with a wretched look. This conversation was so very hard on him too.

Thomas stared into Liam’s eyes in disbelief, a lone tear finally breaking free.

“What will happen to me now? I…I don’t have a da or a ma. Or a home. I have nothin’ and no one,” he whispered breathlessly, hopelessly. “Can I see her? Can I say goodbye to Mammy?” he asked, drawing a panicked intake of air.

“Of course. We shall take you into the village in the morning so you can talk to the doctor yourself. Perhaps he can better explain what happened,” Liam soothed.

“And you won’t have to worry about your future, Thomas. Lord Kelly and I want you to stay here with us,” Charlotte added, still unable to let go of his hand. “So please, do not worry about your future.”

“Ye’re willin’ to let me work and live here, for good?” he asked, his voice so tiny and frail it was gut-wrenching.

“Not quite,” Liam replied and then nodded to Charlotte. Then, turning his attention back to the broken-hearted youngster trapped between them, he explained, “You see, if you were to stay here for good, to move your things in and make this your forever home, we would not expect you to work for us. We want to give you everything in the world, Thomas, and that means giving you more than a job and a bed. We want to give you a family.”

Charlotte waited for him to answer, holding her breath for a yay or nay, but Thomas gazed down into his plate, his young mind no doubt reeling from the pain in his heart. Despair caused his brow to crease, his once bright face stricken to ash.

“Can I go on up to bed now?” he asked quietly.

The sting of fresh tears stung Charlotte’s eyes. “Of course you can. Would you like me to come up and tuck you in like I used to do in Newfoundland?”

Thomas rose from his chair and lumbered toward the door. “Nay. That’s all right. I let ye do that ’cause I was missin’ my mammy. I knew I’d someday come home to her, and she’d do it again. But now, it just seems wrong.”

“Oh.” Charlotte’s heart shattered all over again, but she understood.

“How about if I have Mary whip you up some of those cranberry biscuits ye like so much and bring you up a glass of warm milk before bed?” Liam offered, most likely feeling as helpless as she was. There must be some way to make the child feel better, wasn’t there?

Thomas turned. “Nay, my lord. I just want to go to sleep. Good night.”

For such a lively and boisterous boy, Thomas had now been reduced to a mere shell of himself, lost on a sea of devastation. Charley hugged herself around her middle, completely helpless.

Liam stood up, moving straight to the spirits trolley and downed a shot of whiskey.

“That went better than expected, wouldn’t you agree?” she asked after too-long a stretch of silence, fiddling with the lace napkin between her fingers. Her tears were still flowing at will, and her nose was no doubt red and puffy from constantly wiping. It had *not* gone well. It had stirred up old feelings that Charlotte had long forgotten. Memories of losing her own mother and how adrift she’d felt in the days and months following, especially when her father returned and expected her to forget the only life she had ever known.

She and Liam would not do that to Thomas. They would celebrate Mrs. Brennan, her life, the legacy she’d left behind in the only Brennan family member to survive their plight. She had taught him the importance of hard work and loyalty, which was evident in every day of hard work Thomas gave the Kellys. She bequeathed unto him a deep-seated devotion to all things good and right. Charlotte and Liam would see that his future was no different, picking up right from where his ma had left off.

Charlotte would talk about her often and prompt Thomas to do the same, no matter how much it hurt at first. She would not allow the lad to forget.

Liam poured another two fingers and turned to her. “He’s a resilient lad. He will be all right. We shall see to it that he has everything he needs and desires. But right now, I am tired, love. This has been a day. We should head on up to bed.” He drank his whiskey and took her by the hand, leading her out and up the stairs.

There was no telling if anyone would get a restful sleep this night; Charlotte doubted she would. And when morning arrived, they would take Thomas to say farewell to his loving mother.

The day after that, they would bury her in the ground, lay flowers on her grave and pray for her safe return to the heavens where she belonged.

Chapter Eight

The inevitable passing of time had an ominous way of reminding folks that to everything, there is a season—at least that's what the priest had spouted on top of Mrs. Brennan's grave as Thomas wept silent tears into the lapel of his coat over a week ago.

Being there to witness the utmost devastation and the crumble of a boy's spirit had not been something Violet could have predicted or have wanted. With only days until Christmas, the Kelly home had been reduced to quiet conversations in quiet corners, husbands and wives taking great care to stick together. There was too much left unsaid between them all, too much pain and unresolved conflicts between them, conversations that must wait until Thomas's heart healed some.

At mealtime, they'd all gather around that large table in the hall and make small talk between themselves while everyone watched on to see if today, Thomas might eat something. Violet began to worry as his face took on a grey hue and his eyes no longer danced with life and mischief. She had only known him a fortnight, but that first meeting demonstrated the lust for life the lad possessed. They were nowhere close to the return of that version of him, sadly. The fact that there was a deep, palpable grudge between all of the adults in attendance couldn't be helping matters. Thomas was, after all, an astute young fellow who was a quick study of the world around him. He knew something was brewing too. He had to! Masking it was getting to be ridiculous and near impossible.

Morgan would whisper something to Fiona, causing Quoyle to snort with disgust, shooting daggers across the table. Liam tried his best not to say anything for fear of inciting a tantrum from his older brother, especially anything about Charlotte. And Violet, too, was having a time of it, not to speak against how deplorably Charlotte was continuing to treat Mary and poor old Mr. Harrow. They were family too, and it was Christmas time. It was customary for them to eat with the rest of the family on special occasions, no matter how much they insisted against it. But as per Charlotte's rule, they'd been taking their meals in the kitchen, sharing a small table in the corner beneath a drafty window.

Aye, these evening meals were like a brewing storm where no one could predict how much damage would be left in its wake.

Was it any wonder the child refused to eat? Violet was beginning to lose her appetite, too, especially when two days before Christmas, Charlotte lifted a tiny bell from the table, signalling Mr. Harrow to come forth with a tray of bread. Again, Violet's blood pressure boiled in her veins. *He is not just another servant, dammit!*

Taking a deep, calming breath, Violet cleared her throat. "Thomas, we should go sledding tomorrow if the little bit of snow we had this morning doesn't melt overnight. Would ye like that?"

Thomas looked up from the food he'd been pushing around with his fork, and for a brief moment, Violet thought he might've forgotten his sorrow. Hope glimmered in his blue eyes, hope for a new day and perhaps a little fun. Then as quickly as it had appeared, that sweet little glint disappeared again, leaving behind the hollow gaze she had become too familiar with.

Charlotte slammed down her cup, startling Violet. "I really do not think the child is ready for merry-making, Violet. He's grieving; can you not see that?"

Violet narrowed her gaze. "What makes you the authority on when sufficient time has passed for grievin'?" Even though this was not where the conversation should be had, Violet could no longer hold her tongue in front of the boy. "And what makes you so learned on the inner makins of a child who's lost his mother? Ye don't even have children of yer own." Oh, sweet Jesus in the garden, had that *really* come spewing out of her mouth? As soon as she'd said it, she wanted to take it back, but it was too late, for Charley was standing now, her face a bright pink shade of fury.

"Because, if you must know, Miss High and Mighty, I *was* a child who lost her mother. I understand his need to withdraw. What gives you the right to criticize me for doing what's best for him? You and your pig-headed husband should have stayed out in the country, running barefoot and living off dirt and berries. I should have never asked you to come!"

"Pig-headed! How dare ye! He wouldn't be pig-headed had ye not first run his ship aground, taken his little brother hostage and all but ruined poor Mrs. Murtagh's business venture. Bunch o' savages, ye were. And then ye have the nerve to bring those same savages into this house and hang your trinkets and treasures about to rub salt into Lord Kelly's wounds!" Oh, it was all coming out now, and it seemed there was no stopping it. Violet's fists had to be turning white at her sides with how tightly she squeezed them.

Charlotte picked up her fork and jabbed it in the air, driving her point home. "This is my home now, and I'll do what I damn-well like!

I'll not have you and your boar of a husband marching in here and making demands!" Charlotte countered, slamming the fork upon the table.

Violet's need to slap the smug look off Charlotte's face was all-encompassing.

"Aye, that's right. I'm not the one who loves to make demands! Ye've no trouble pushing yer authority when makin' yer demands on Mary and Mr. Harrow. But yer too short-sighted and small-minded to consider that those folks who do yer bidding and carry out every silly wish yer black heart desires are indeed family. But of course, being raised by the worst sort, ye wouldn't know much about that, now would ye?" Violet stood face to face with Charlotte, with only the solid mahogany separating them.

A flash of fury glimmered in Charlotte's gaze. "Why don't you move your things out into the barn with the rest of the bitches? Might even be a fresh litter of pups for you to mother."

Suddenly, a loud thud vibrated throughout the hall as the force of Brady's fist upon the table rattled the dinnerware.

Standing at his full, imposing height, he barked, "That's quite enough from the pair of ye! Violet, let's go. Liam, I suggest ye do somethin' about yer…wife." That last syllable ground out of his mouth as if it was mixed with clay and pebbles.

Liam took to his feet and stalked around his chair in front of Brady. "And what do you suggest I do about my wife, Brady? She's the best thing that's ever happened to me, and you know it." His tone wasn't quite angry, but Violet detected notes of hurt in there. Well, good! It was time for him to see past this infatuation and realize the mistake he'd made by marrying a woman who'd done so much damage to the family. It was time he understood how her presence affected everyone.

Brady pointed a forceful finger into his brother's chest. "The best thing that's ever happened to ye?" His head falling back, a laugh erupted from his belly. "Have ye been so lonely and naïve to believe these savages are what's good for ye? For our family? Ye need to stop thinkin' *with* the family jewels and start protectin' 'em," he growled, the colour in his face rising.

Before Violet could predict Liam's retort or defence, he reared back a fist and landed a right hook into Brady's cheek. Bone on bone cracked against the silence, and for that one brief moment when Brady stood stupefied and shocked, no one dared to take a breath.

Quoyle took a step toward the feuding Kelly men, but to Violet's surprise, Morgan's deep timbre cut through the hall, halting his interference. "Ye can sit the feck back down. This is between the Kelly lads. If they have shite to clear up, then yer not the miserable feck to stop 'em."

For someone along in years, Quoyle moved swiftly around the table and grabbed Morgan by the shirt collar, and he, too, reared back his fist.

Then the world fell away, and the adults were reminded of an impressionable young man's presence.

Thomas was now standing atop the table, kicking over dishes and platters to garner attention. A hefty slab of gravy-laden roasted pork landed on the floor with a "schwack", and a decanter of red wine fell on its side, creating a crimson river down the centre of the table. Crystal glasses smashed. Flowery china spread across the room like confetti. All heads turned and gaped at the poor lad having a tantrum in the middle of the commotion.

Liam let go of Brady and straightened his ruffled attire. Brady, still red-faced and ready to fight, took a deep breath, his eyes scanning the room like a trapped bear, then finally landed on the boy with the tears running down his face. Brady's gaze shifted to Violet's for the briefest of moments, and she could feel his guilt and regret cascading off him with the pleading glint in his eyes.

Thomas stomped his foot and narrowed his eyes on Charlotte. "Ye want me to live here with ye people? I can't live here with ye! Ye all hate one another!" he cried, wiping his runny nose in the sleeve of his shirt. Then he turned to address Liam, his brows crunching with utter disgust. "Ye think I don't notice what's been goin' on 'round here? For weeks now, ye've all been either at one another's throats or ignorin' each other, and I can't take it anymore. Here I am, with nothin' and no one. Ye have each other, yet ye can't stop fightin' and scratchin' long enough to appreciate it. Ye should all be ashamed of yerselves!

"I don't know where I'll go, Lord Kelly, but it certainly won't be here with ye lot!" And with that, he jumped from the table and ran from the room, leaving everyone behind in the blown-up pressure cooker of resentment and bitterness.

Without a word, Violet and Charlotte took their seats. Brady and Liam pushed away from one another, nearly knocking each other to the ground in the process. Morgan released Quoyle and took Fiona's hand, leading her out the door in silence. Quoyle soon followed, but Violet doubted very much they retreated in the same direction.

With just the four of them remaining, they were forced to take a good look at themselves and *really* put some thought into their deplorable behaviour. Unfortunately, the air in that dining hall was unbearably thick and laced with hatred, and it was difficult for any one of them to break the silence, much less analyze their actions.

Violet took a chance and drew in a deep breath. "The boy isn't wrong, ye know. We have been actin' disgracefully," she started, her hands clasped in front of her chin to keep from breaking out into an

all-out sob. Pregnancy had a way of turning her emotions into a tsunami. Despite the Mannings' absence, she couldn't contain her secret any longer, and so had planned on sharing her joyous news around the family supper table, but that wouldn't happen now. Nay, this family was well past talking, much less discussing the excitement of a brand-new Kelly bairn.

Charlotte looked up from her dinner plate, pinning Violet with an unreadable glare. "That boy is our ward now, and I'll do anything and everything to ensure he is safe and happy. I was only trying to protect him, to protect his heart from the guilt he would feel if he were to go out gallivanting so soon after his mother's death. If you cannot keep your nose out of our business concerning his welfare, I suggest you leave."

"Charley!" Liam gasped, reaching beneath the table and bringing her hand topside.

Charlotte snatched her hand away as if Liam's touch would blister her flesh. "Don't Charley me, Liam Kelly! Thomas is ours to protect. I'll not stand for one moment of that woman's interference."

Violet stood, squaring her shoulders. "Fine. We shall be gone in the morning. Brady?"

Brady joined her, and taking her hand in his, placed a kiss atop it. Turning back to Liam, he snarled, "We're done here. Goodbye, brother."

Sticking her nose in the air, Violet and Brady retreated from that blasted room, leaving with only one regret—that Thomas had seen them at their ugliest and at a time when the lad needed kindness and compassion more than anything.

"Are we really leavin', my love?" she dared to whisper as they strolled arm and arm back to their room.

Brady stopped in the hall. "Look around, Vy. This place is no longer ours, and I'm just fine with that. We've got a beautiful little place of our own, and I can't wait to get ye home and celebrate this babe growin' inside ye."

Violet gasped. "What? How? When did ye…?" she started, excited butterflies quickening inside her womb.

Brady held a finger to her lips, hushing her inquisition and chuckled. "They may think I'm nothin' more than a barbarian, but my dear, sweet, Vy, I am yer husband. 'Tis my job to understand the inner-workings of my wife."

Violet gaped up at him, love and adoration spreading from her toes to her cheeks. How she adored this man of hers. How lucky they'd been in finding one another, despite the rocky road they'd travelled in the beginning.

Brady kissed her with warmth and tenderness, wrapping her in his

strong embrace. When her spinning head quieted, she asked, “So I’ll assume that yer happy about the bairn?”

Lifting her into his arms, Brady kissed her again and growled in a way that sent shivers down her spine. “Let me show ye just how happy I am. Forget this shite with Liam. Let them take care of this house; we’ll take care of ours.”

Kicking the door to their chamber open with his foot, Brady gently placed her upon the bed.

“I’ll check in on the babe, but don’t ye move,” he playfully growled and disappeared into the shadows to where little Sean was sleeping. When he returned, he cast her a wicked grin, causing her body to break out in a hot sweat.

Oh, he was indeed pleased with her baby news! “Come and show me, husband, just how happy ye are,” she cooed, quickly unfastening the string of buttons holding her breasts in place.

By the time Brady reached her, his clothes were nothing more than a heap at the foot of the bed. He crawled atop her, taking his time, placing feather-light kisses upon her goose-fleshed skin from her toes to her neck.

Resting his hand upon her belly, he nuzzled into her ear. “This one’s a girl with dark, flaming hair and a temper like her father’s.” Then his hand moved lower; his fingers gently dipping in and out of her slick folds until she was breathless.

Aye, she was indeed eager to return home to their little nest far removed from the chaos of the Kelly manor. Let Liam and Charlotte do as they like with it. The only thing that mattered as Brady’s hot lips devoured her throbbing flesh was that their lives would continue on; their love and family would grow, with or without Liam and Charley’s presence.

Violet fisted the sheets in one hand and tore at a tuft of Brady’s thick, black hair in the other as ecstasy took hold, claiming each and every part of her. She smiled inwardly.

Let the devil take ’em all. I’m goin’ home with this beast of mine.

Chapter Nine

The next morning brought with it a gray pall cast about the entire Kelly home. Charlotte watched silently as Brady heaved trunk after trunk down the grand staircase and dropped them into the foyer. *Why, oh, why hadn't he just rung for the valet or even Mr. Harrow to assist him?* If the servants weren't being utilized in the manner they were hired, what was the purpose of keeping them on? Snippets of her and Violet's row trickled into her mind. Perhaps she *ought* to treat Mary and Mr. Harrow more like family. Maybe she should at least have a conversation with Liam on the matter as she had no idea what his feelings were on the subject.

Assessing the mess of crates and chests multiplying before her eyes, it was clear to see that Violet had been serious about leaving, despite Christmas being only a day away. But Charley couldn't find that piece of her heart that should regret it; she was glad to be rid of them. Their presence cast more doubt into her mind than necessary. When had she become so weak and vulnerable*? For fuck sake, Charley, get out of your own head!* She was and will always be Charlotte Hollister—raised on the open seas, ship captain to many men—no matter who she married. She refused to let Violet's soft sensibilities get the best of her.

Just then, Liam's breath skated across the shell of her ear. "Glad to see them leaving, love?" he asked quietly. "You must try to disguise your joy a little," he chuckled.

Turning in his embrace, she replied, "Eager to have my home back to normal. I admit I am disappointed that Brady is yet unable to forgive my past. But this is our life to live, and if he can't move on, then we shall have to move on without him. Are you all right with that?" She searched his hazel pools for some sign of uncertainty but found none. Instead, Liam cast her an assertive side glance, and his lip turned up at the corner.

"I choose you, Charley. I chose you all those nights ago at sea, and I'd choose you again if I had to. Brady can go to hell," he whispered, tugging her closer. "Leave this miserable lot to their packing. We have a lad who needs us. Strange, he hasn't been downstairs to rob the kitchen yet."

Charlotte took his hand and led him past Brady without as much as

a glance of acknowledgement and then up the steps toward Thomas's room. "Last night was quite the ordeal for him. He's probably still sleeping, the poor angel. I wish he hadn't witnessed any of that foolishness. Let's pray he's not still angry."

"I'm sure a good night's sleep has calmed his hot temper, love," Liam replied, laying a soft knock at Thomas's door.

When no one answered, he pushed inside, finding the tiny room empty. Although the bed had been slept in, the sheets appeared knotted as if a restful night's sleep had been a struggle for the poor lad. The curtains were pulled back, letting the heat from the morning sun warm the otherwise chilly space, an indication that Thomas had risen early. But where could he be at this hour? Liam turned to Charlotte, his brows knit with worry and uncertainty.

"Think he's out in the barn at his chores?" he asked, taking a few tentative steps inside toward the little alcove where Liam had placed a writing desk for Thomas to carry out his studies.

"He does like to get his chores completed early, giving him the rest of the day to torment the house staff," Charlotte replied with a nervous chuckle, an attempt to ease Liam's worried mind.

Liam turned to her with a grimace. "Charley, come and look at this," he said, lifting a folded piece of paper from the desktop.

A spiky ball of dread formed in her stomach, and she found it hard to swallow the bile rising in her throat.

"You don't think…." She couldn't even finish the question. If Thomas had run off, he could be anywhere by now.

Liam carefully unfolded the note and stared down at Thomas's juvenile scrawlings, the colour in his face draining while Charlotte hung on by a thin thread of sanity. Liam's gaze shifted to the window, his back now turned on her. His head dropped, and his shoulders slumped; a defeated man now stood before her, and she didn't have to inquire further. Thomas had indeed ran away. The letter he'd left was a farewell.

Rushing to his side, Charlotte threw her arms around his shoulders. "We shall find him. You'll see. We'll have the entire house out searching. He will be home in no time," she reassured, but her heart just wasn't in it. Thomas had chosen to distance himself from them. It was a punch to the gut if she'd ever felt one. One she deserved. A blow they all deserved.

Liam wiped a silent tear from his cheek and turned to her. "We failed him, Charley. We failed to provide him with a safe and welcoming home. We failed to heal his broken heart when he needed it most. Such selfish creatures we are," he groaned, shaking his head.

He was right, though. They *had* been selfish and had put Thomas's feelings low on the priority list, even though it hadn't been anyone's

intention.

Charlotte tucked a strand of honey-coloured hair behind his ear and cupped his cheek. “Well, the quicker we find him, the sooner we can start making this right. Let’s go.” Dragging him by the hand, Charlotte claimed charge of a situation she had a significant hand in creating and led him out to the landing.

Looking down, she could still see Brady and Violet attempting to create calm out of their pile of chaos. There was no time to waste.

“Stop what you’re doing!” Charlotte shouted down.

Brady stood from the trunks he was arranging and crossed his arms over his heaving chest. “’Tis too late. I don’t want to hear one word ye got to say.”

Charlotte’s gaze flew to Liam’s in a plea for help.

“The boy is missing, Brady.” Liam barked.

Brady cocked his head to the side, and his brows scrunched. “What? Who?”

By God, Charlotte wanted nothing more than to haul her pistols off the wall in the study and bury a ball of lead in that man’s chest. “Thomas is missing! What boy do you think he’s talking about?” she shouted, throwing her arms up in exasperation.

Violet stopped in her tracks, her hand flying to her open mouth. “Have ye checked in the barn? Ye know how he loves to talk to the horses,” she suggested, picking her tiny son up off the floor.

“We haven’t checked anywhere, and there’s really no point in doing so. He left a note.” Liam’s voice sounded so strange, so distant. He truly was a broken man, a man who had broken a promise. If they didn’t find the lad soon, no doubt the guilt would eat him alive.

Charlotte held her breath while Brady and Violet had a hushed conversation between themselves.

Brady squared his shoulders. “Right then. Call everyone into the study. I want to have a look at that letter.”

Within the hour, everyone was gathered around the desk studying the barely legible handwriting of Thomas Brennan.

“Charlotte and I will check the village, talk to the merchants and inquire if anyone has seen him,” Liam said, pulling at his necktie, a bead of sweat trickling from his temple.

Brady nodded. “Aye. Vy and I will check the shipyard. Might be that he’s down there under the crew’s feet, causing all kinds of trouble. Quoyle, you stay here and search the grounds. He might’ve sought refuge in one of the old hunting lodges,” he ordered, and for the first time since his arrival, Charlotte was grateful he’d stood up and taken charge. She doubted she had the energy to execute orders without the waves of emotion roiling through her.

Quoyle nodded his agreement and stalked out the door with

purposeful strides.

Morgan pulled Fiona into his side. “I think he might’ve gone home to his ma’s place. Fiona and I will start there.”

Charlotte donned her coat and gloves while Liam raced outside to ready the carriage while the rest of them scattered in their respective directions.

Once outside, Charlotte nestled herself into the carriage with Liam while everyone else had chosen horseback. A wave of envy rippled through her heart, watching Violet and Fiona mount their mares with such ease. Living aboard a ship for most of her life hadn’t provided the opportunity to learn to ride, a problem she would most certainly rectify in the future. Giving herself a little shake, Charley chided herself for having such petty thoughts at a time like this. What the hell was wrong with her lately?

“Wait!” she cried, and just before the lot of them carried on with their search, all heads turned to hers poking out the carriage window. “Tomorrow is Christmas Day. Everyone, take care and bring him home safely. I want each and every one of you to be sitting around our table in the morning. Be careful; there’s weather coming.” If there was anything Charlotte was profoundly good at, it was predicting the weather, and by the mere smell carried upon the wind, she knew they would have a white Christmas. The sea had taught her so much, but here on land, she realized she had much more to learn. “We shall all meet at the shipyard before returning home. Together.”

Violet smiled at her, the simple gesture cutting straight to her heart. Perhaps they could learn to be civil and develop a plan regarding Mary and Mr. Harrow that satisfied everyone. Charlotte turned her gaze back to the Kelly family home where Mary and Mr. Harrow stood, waving their good-byes with tears in their eyes. The emotion they clearly carried classified them as family, and Charlotte vowed never to forget this moment.

“I’ve been a fool, Liam,” she groaned miserably.

Liam’s gaze shot to hers across the carriage. “Whatever do you mean, love?” Liam leaned forward in his seat, resting his elbows upon his knees.

“Violet and I have been arguing over the manner in which I treat the staff. I’ve fought her on so many issues, believing that Mary ought to be treated as a maid should. And poor Mr. Harrow, he’s not long for this world, and I have expected too much from such an old soul,” she sobbed through a kerchief.

Liam sighed and leaned back in his seat. “I meant to speak with you on this, but I fear with Thomas’s mother being sick and my business obligations, I completely failed to set things straight. I brought you here and plunged you into this world with little to no guidance to

carry you.

“From the first day you arrived, it was my duty to teach you how things are done around here. I have failed you too, my love.”

Charlotte was in his arms in an instant, stroking his hair, planting feather-light kisses across his furrowed brow. “No more talk like that. You have not failed anyone. I take full responsibility for my actions and will see to it that I right them. I will even sit and talk to your brother alone. I need him to accept me, and ensuring that happens falls on me. Now, let’s go find our boy.”

Chapter Ten

By supper time, Violet's backside had begun to burn, but her nerves had frayed hours ago. On their way to the shipyard, they'd searched every alleyway, nook and cranny on the Long Walk. Their search took them inside the many taverns, hotels and bakeries in the area, but alas, there was no sign of Thomas.

"I think 'tis time to head home, Vy. The wind is beginning to pick up, the temperature startin' to drop. Might get more snow again this evenin'," Brady said, blowing warm breaths into his fisted hands.

Violet turned in her saddle. "Charlotte was clear in requesting we all meet back at the shipyard."

Brady whipped his head around and narrowed his gaze. "I do not take orders from the likes of her. You're in a delicate condition, and I'll not have ye out in nasty weather."

Violet dismounted from her mare with a huff, challenging him to do the same. Standing face to face with the most stubborn man alive, she refused to back down. Things had to change and change fast. If they successfully found the lad, *everyone* had to change to keep him under the Kelly family protection. If he fled the madness again, he might expose himself to the many dangers lurking, eager to pull a naive young lad into the pits of hell. *God, bring him home safely.*

Poking Brady's chest, she ground out, "I love ye, Brady Kelly, more than anything on God's green earth, but I am through with this ridiculous feud between ye and yer brother. Aye, Charlotte has a painted past, but even I can see she's only trying her best to become acquainted with a world so foreign from her own. I think 'tis well past time to give her a chance to prove herself. Yer brother is no eegit. Put this to rest for all our sakes, once and for all. I'm beggin' ye." The sting of fresh tears prickled at her eyes, and a knot of emotion nearly sent her crashing toward the frozen ground. Enough was enough.

Brady pulled her into his arms, rocking her within the warm embrace of his strong arms. "Fine, Vy. I'll do better. And I'm not just sayin' it this time."

Sobbing into his chest, she added, "I've been so cruel to her. I would do well to remember that she comes from a much different upbringing than all of us. And, while no one could blame her if she

didn't, I do hope she accepts our apologies. 'Tis time to reunite this family."

"Agreed, Vy. Shipyard it is. It will be nice to get warm by the fire while we wait," he replied, kissing the top of her head. "Perhaps we'll be the first to arrive, and I can warm ye m'self." *This man!*

When they arrived at the waterfront, Liam and Charlotte were standing on the dock, deep in conversation with the Murtaghs. Violet chuckled to herself for the powers that be, having a hand in punishing Brady further, not allowing him to have his wicked way with her.

As they drew closer, it was clear that this was no ordinary conversation; nay, there was yet another argument brewing as more people ducked out from the wheelhouse of a schooner.

"Brady! That's Jack's boat!" Violet exclaimed.

"Aye, that it is. And I do believe the fellow with his fist raised is Dick Fagan, Jack's relief skip. What the feck is goin' on down there?"

Violet was ever-so-grateful for the return of Jack and Kylee; it was difficult to remember there was an all-out brawl unfolding before her eyes.

"What's goin' on here?" Brady barked, gaining everyone's attention as only he could. "Where is Jack?"

Jack stepped out of the wheelhouse with the mention of his name, followed by Kylee and an angry, surly child in tow. "I'm here. And it seems I've found a stowaway."

"I found 'im eatin' stew right from the pot." Dick explained, obviously not impressed with the notion of sharing his supper.

Jack Manning rested a hand upon Dick's shoulder. "Go on now, 'tis not the end of the world. Nothin' wrong with a little charity, especially at Christmas." Stooping down only a little to meet Thomas's gaze, he said, "Next time ye sneak aboard a vessel, ye best check first if it's comin' or goin'."

Before the lad could even conjure a response, Charlotte shouted, "Thomas! You're all right! You had me worried sick! Come here."

Thomas crossed his arms and shook his head. "Nay. I'd rather swim across the ocean than go to ye. I told ye, I'm not livin' in a house where everyone's scrappin' all the time!" he shouted, stomping his foot.

Even though Charlotte would become his caregiver, the need to console him in a motherly fashion consumed Violet, giving her a voice to help make things better.

"If ye come home and get a good night's sleep, tomorrow we can sit down and have a long discussion. Because ye're right, Thomas. We have been actin' like children," Violet said, her smile stretching wide in hopes he might see her as an ally. Her gaze flashed to Charlotte's, and instead of an angry scowl for having interfered, Charlotte nodded

in appreciation.

Thomas seemed to think on it a moment, his gaze shooting from adult to adult as if he were gauging the sincerity in Violet's words. Finally, he sighed. "Fine. One night and only 'cause I'm dog-tired. T'morrow morn' I'll hear ye out, but I'm makin' no promises to stay. Lots o' boats lookin' to hire a steward."

Charlotte bent and held her arms out, waiting for the boy to run into them. But, instead, Thomas lumbered on past her and climbed into the carriage.

Violet reached out for Charlotte's gloved hands, the wind and snow whipping around them in a flurry. "He will be all right, Charley. We'll make sure of it," she reassured.

Charlotte wiped a tear from her rosy cheek before it turned to ice there. "Vy, why don't you let Liam ride your horse home. You and Miss Fiona should ride with Thomas and me."

Violet looked to Brady, who gave her a slight wink. Turning back to her sister-in-law, she agreed, "Aye. That's a good idea. And perhaps Kylee might like to join us as well."

All the ladies piled into the carriage, squashing poor Thomas between Charlotte and Violet. There was a silent truce between them, an unsaid understanding that the serious conversations would wait until they were back at the keep behind closed doors. So instead, Kylee regaled them with tales of hers and Jack's adventures.

To Fiona's delight, the Mannings had successfully met their delivery deadlines for her signature pale ale and had even returned home with five new contracts for O'Shea's.

"Then what took ye so long? We've been expectin' ye for weeks?" Violet asked, pulling the fur coverlet further up her lap as the chill was truly beginning to set in.

"Well, I think that's a story best left for us to tell when we're all together," Kylee replied, a full blush creeping up her cheeks.

Charlotte whistled, "Must be some story."

All the ladies laughed, the air feeling lighter already, except for the lad wedged between them. He remained utterly petulant the entire ride home.

Chapter Eleven

The fires in the study were blazing, the flickering light casting shadows into every corner and the heat warming them from the outside in. Liam passed out mugs of warm brandy, a job that under normal circumstances would have been left to Mr. Harrow, but Charlotte thought it best to give them the night free from their duties and asked if they might join them as equals. Thomas's welfare was everyone's concern, and his upbringing, everyone's responsibility. Charlotte was baffled that she hadn't realized that sooner. Unfortunately, it took an all-out brawl and a missing boy to make her see the error of her ways.

Every leather chair scattered about was filled, and after Liam finished handing out the brandy, he took his seat behind the desk, with Brady to his right.

"I've put Thomas to bed, and God willing, he stays there. As for the rest of us, it's high time we clear the air, discuss our respective grievances and work on a solution to move forward," Liam said, taking a sip.

"Aye, agreed, brother. This feud has gone on long enough, and I know I've been the cause of most of it," Brady added, turning slightly to the left, a sincere look upon his face. This was going to be difficult for him. Charlotte knew that his pride and his distaste for her past would be a mountain Brady Kelly had to overcome, but she vowed to try a little harder to help his ascent.

Raising from her seat, Charlotte moved toward the front of the desk, holding her glass in her shaking hands. All that mattered was Thomas. She would do and say whatever was necessary to help mend this family and ensure Thomas remained within it.

"Brady, I know we haven't spent very much time in each other's company, and I know you aren't very well acquainted with Quoyle or me, but I implore you to give us a chance.

"Try to understand that when I wrecked your ship and consumed Miss Fiona's cargo, I was indeed a pirate of the most notorious sort. I had spent a lifetime taking what I wanted, doing whatever deemed necessary to survive." Brady shook his head and raised a hand. "No, please, let me finish," she cut, ceasing his words.

Brady leaned back and sighed. “Carry on, lass.”

Charlotte took a deep, steadying breath. “I had learned that way of life from my father from the time I was nine. I knew no other way. But then, something miraculous happened. I met your brother, and all those years scraping, plundering and terrorizing seemed to melt away, reminding me of the life I’d been yanked from. You see, before my mother passed, she had been raising me to become a lady in high standing someday. Meeting Liam reminded me of all that I had lost and yearned to have again.”

Brady rested his elbows upon the desk, his hands clasped in front of his mouth, pensively. He seemed to be contemplating and deliberating his reply, causing butterflies to form in her belly. Since meeting the Kelly men, she had done nothing but grovel to gain their love and understanding, but they were worth it.

Narrowing his gaze, he said, “I understand. At least, I think I do. But why did ye lie to me for so long? Ye could have told me who ye were the first time we met. Or at least, the first time ye stepped foot across this threshold.” He rubbed his temples, clearly struggling to reel in his infamous temper. “How am I ever s'posed to trust ye?”

Charlotte reached out her hand, waiting for him to take it. He eyed the digits pensively for a moment, and then his eyes flashed with understanding. When his calloused fingers held hers, she said, “I stayed aboard that ship all those years because they were my family. They were all I knew. And as a family should, they recognized my yearning for a life on land.

“They let me go, Brady. I had been loyal to them as brothers, and now, I’m asking you to allow me to be loyal to you, my new brother. I tried to hide my secret because I knew you’d never accept me, although I’m hoping you will someday. I assure you, this is my family now, and I’ll fight to the death to protect every soul under this roof.”

A thick silence stretched between them, Charlotte’s heart thumping furiously in her chest. She didn’t *need* these people to love her. She didn’t *need* them to accept her. But she wanted those things more than anything she had ever wanted before.

Brady rose from his seat and made his way around the desk in front of her. She half excepted him to spit in her face, but when he pulled her into his arms and placed a kiss on her forehead, her heart shattered into a million pieces, each shard belonging to all who bore witness to his display of acceptance.

“I forgive ye,” he said. “But we have to do something about yer taste in décor!”

His laughter rang out and was met with a slight chuckle of her own. His displeasure about her maritime tastes had very little to do with changing the Kelly legacy or erasing history; it had been his pain and

mistrust that had made him so angry. And by God, if she had to strip it all away and hide it all in a little room for her own private viewing, she would, just to please him.

"I will understand if you would like me to change it all back," she offered.

"Nay. If that's what makes this place yer home too, then I say keep the lot of it. Yer collection will be added to the Kelly family history books, as it should be."

Those words were like the sweetest melody.

Gazing up into his rugged face, she smiled gratefully. "Thank you, Brady. And I promise never to make you regret it."

Brady chuckled. "I have no doubt," he replied, tapping the tip of her nose. These were peculiar people. Affectionate people.

Charlotte turned to Violet then, addressing her directly. This apology was long overdue. "I know I have a lot to learn about running this house. I seem to have residual uppity tendencies that your tutelage can help break me from, that is, if you'll stay for a few weeks and help me with that. I can think of no other woman and mother to guide me through these rough waters with Thomas. I value you, Violet. Please say you'll think about staying." Violet wiped a tear away and nodded her agreement.

Then, turning to Mary and Mr. Harrow, who were huddled in the corner holding onto every word, she continued, "You both are family, I realize that now. How I could have been so simple-minded on such a fact is beyond me. If you would please accept my sincerest apologies, I'd be grateful. You'll never have to hear that damn bell ring again. I will need everyone's help raising Thomas in a warm and loving home, including yours. Especially yours."

Mr. Harrow smiled and nodded, his wrinkly blue eyes dancing in the firelight. But Mary's reaction was completely unexpected. She rushed from her chair and wrapped her arms around Charlotte, nearly knocking her over in the process.

"Ouf! I'm glad to see there are no hard feelings, Mary." Charlotte chuckled.

Mary pulled away, her ruddy cheeks filled with joy. "Nay, lass. I knew ye'd come to yer senses soon enough. We Kellys always come to our senses sooner or later," she said, shooting Brady a knowing smirk. "And don't be frettin'; ye weren't that hard on us. Ye should've been here in the early days when the little lords' mother first arrived! She'd been a force to be reckoned with! We can handle a little pirate lass 'round here, sure!"

Charlotte looked to Liam. He'd been so quiet, and she couldn't help but wonder what was on his mind. She had made her peace. She prayed he and Brady would be able to do the same.

“Liam. Don’t you have something to say to Brady?” Mary said as if reading her mind.

Liam rose from his chair and paced the room. Charlotte knew he was collecting his thoughts. Would he be stubborn and send Brady to hell? Her stomach was roiling the longer he paced in silence. Charlotte took a seat next to Violet and held her hand.

Their entire future was hinged on this moment. Would the Kelly men learn to finally live in harmony, or would they become bitter enemies for all eternity?

Brady’s brogue broke the silence first. “’Tis done, Liam. There’s nothing more to say except that I am sorry. Please accept my apologies for being the brooding boar that I’ve been. And if ye don’t, ye’ll have my blood on yer hands.”

Liam turned and faced his brother, a look of shock replacing his tormented expression. “Yer blood? I…I do not quite understand.”

Brady held out his sizeable bear-like hand to Liam and grinned. “If ye don’t accept my apology, Vy will have m’head.”

Charlotte watched her husband closely. Too many heartbeats passed when he finally looked at her and then back to his brother, a smile stretching across his teeth. He grabbed Brady’s hand in a quick shake and pulled him close, wrapping his other arm around Brady’s back.

“One day, we shall tell our children of our tales and adventures, but I hope this is the last time we quarrel. You’re the only blood I have, and I’ll not risk losing you to a feud or at the hand of your very capable wife,” Liam replied, his voice sounding so free of sorrow and torment that it caused Charlotte’s heart to sing.

The air in the study had shifted, the seasons of their family ever-changing for the better. Brady went to the drink cart and poured himself and Liam a glass of the good stuff. “Enough of that cheap brandy. Here’s to the future, little brother. We owe it to ourselves and to our family to remember that we’re the glue holdin’ it all together.” Raising their glasses, they drank.

Charlotte’s gaze followed Liam’s as he scanned the room. “Murtagh, I trust that you and Quoyle will have no further qualms? When you and Miss Fiona visit—and I expect that to be often—I trust you all will get along.” It wasn’t so much of a question as it was an order. Morgan and Quoyle had a history, one laced in pain and abuse. If Morgan could forgive all Quoyle’s misdeeds, it would prove what Charlotte knew all along—Morgan might not have been born into nobility, but he was one of the most honourable men she had ever met.

Morgan groaned under his breath, earning him a slight jab in the ribs from his wife. “Ach! O’ course, little lord. Water under the bridge. After what he did for me and Fiona, I had no right to find issue with

him the other night at supper. Quoyle?" Morgan asked, his brows lifting with expectation.

"Never ye mind all that, Murtagh. I ain't gonna haul ye into nar hug, so ye can forget it. But friends we is," Quoyle drawled from his chair in front of the hearth where he was still rubbing the chill from his misshapen fingers. Charlotte was so grateful for deciding to finally abandon ship; she couldn't predict how many more winters on the Atlantic her old quartermaster would endure.

Just then, Jack Manning stood and raised his glass with one hand while holding Miss Kylee's gloved hand in the other. "Brady, ye might think that ye two are the glue, but even I can see that 'tis Charlotte who's stitched this clan back together. So, here's to Charlotte, may the wind be forever in yer sails."

All around the room, glasses clinked together in Charley's honour. Her crew had done the same on many an occasion, but she had never been so proud in all her life, sitting there, surrounded by this family of hers. A blush crept up her cheeks, and she stifled a joyful sob. She did, after all, have to maintain some sense of decorum.

"Now, if there are no further matters and grievances to air, off to bed with the lot o' ye," Mary called, clapping her hands together. "Shoo. Git. There's a little boy who really needs a happy Christmas mornin'. He'll be expectin' a present from *Daidí na Nollag*."

Charlotte gazed up at Liam. "I want to check on him, husband. He may want to light the candle and lay out the mince pie," she suggested quietly.

Liam smiled down on her, filling her heart with so much love she thought it might burst. "Yes, he just might. Let's go."

Charlotte bade them a good night, holding her new sister in a lingering embrace. "Merry Christmas, Violet."

"*Nollaig Shona Dhuit*, Charley. Sleep well," Violet replied.

While Charlotte could not speak Violet's native Gaelic tongue and had minimal inclination to learn as it was so rarely spoken now, her heart knew what *Merry Christmas* sounded like. She felt it in every bone in her body.

Once Liam and Charlotte reached Thomas's door, a familiar and unwanted feeling of dread crept in. Her heart chanted and prayed that he was still in there, that he hadn't ran off again, for there was no telling where the lad might go next time. He would not be found *if* there was a next time. He was a clever lad.

"Thomas?" Liam called softly.

A pregnant pause sliced the evening air, and instinctively, Charlotte thought the worst. Instead of waiting, she opened the door and rushed inside.

Thomas was asleep on top of the coverlet, still fully clothed, almost

as if he was taking a short nap with hopes of resuming his getaway when he awoke.

Charlotte sat beside him and stroked his blonde hair as relief swept over her.

"Thomas? Wake up."

His blue eyes fluttered open, and if she wasn't mistaken, she was sure she caught the slight hint of a smile, but then it disappeared again.

"I miss Ma," he moaned wretchedly.

It was incomprehensible how three tiny words had the ability to shatter her heart, but they did. Not out of jealousy or feelings of inadequacy, but genuine heartbreak for how the lad pined over his mother.

"I know," she replied, gathering him into her arms. "We were going to wait until morning, but I wanted to tell you that all the grown-ups have just had a meeting to discuss our disgraceful behaviour. So if we can find it in our hearts to forgive each other, do you think you can find it in yours to forgive all of us?" she asked, rocking him back and forth.

Before he could answer, Liam took a knee in front of them. "I cannot blame you for running away from this madness, lad. But I do hope you can give us another chance. We want you to live here, as our own. What do you say? Think you can let us start fresh?" Liam asked, his gaze darting from Thomas and back to Charlotte. His hazel pools held such hope, and it was nearly enough to send her into a fit of sobs.

Indeed, Charlotte had become weak, malleable, and soft, but as she held onto the sweetest little boy she had ever known, none of that mattered. He needed a kind and patient woman to raise him right, and that's precisely what Charley yearned to become.

Thomas sniffed and wiped a tear away. "Can I think about it?"

Charley and Liam gaped at one another. What could they say? "Of course," Liam started. "Take all the time you need. There will be a roof over your head and food in your belly until you decide what suits you."

As he cuddled back into her arms, Charlotte already knew what Thomas's decision would be. Taking Violet's advice to offer some distraction from his pain and sorrow, she sat him up and said, "You know Santy is coming tonight, don't you? Would you like to come downstairs and light the candle in the window and perhaps ask Mary to cut you out a slice of mince pie to leave for him?"

Thomas wanted nothing more than to be left alone; that fact was evident in his hesitation to answer.

Liam stood and held out his hand. "You know, when Brady and I were your age, this part of Christmas was Mary's favourite. It's been

such a long time since she had young ones about to help her prepare for Santy. You really would be making her Christmas wish come true."

And there it was. The mere thought of making someone else happy was the one thing that broke Thomas's beautiful smile from its captivity.

"All right, sir. I'll come down, but just for a little while," Thomas replied timidly and ambled from Charlotte's embrace and out the door.

That night, after Thomas had been tucked back into bed, Charlotte and Liam retreated to their chamber in search of each other's warmth and comfort.

Charlotte tucked herself into the crook of his arm, resting her cheek against his chest. "Do you think he will decide to stay? I think he already has, but he's still punishing us a little," she chuckled.

Liam shifted beneath her, bringing his arm up behind his head. "He's punishing me, love. I am supposed to be the captain of his ship, so this is *his* version of a mutiny. I don't expect it'll last. His heart belongs to us."

Charlotte fell asleep that night with hopes and dreams of becoming Thomas's new mother. As she hadn't had a mother of her own in a very long time, nor had she spent much time around maternal figures, she hadn't the faintest idea of what she was doing.

There was only one thing she knew for sure. Her heart would guide her on each step of their life's journey.

Chapter Twelve

Thomas's eyes popped open, his body shooting upright at the sudden clanging and banging echoing from the hallway.
"Everyone up! Santy's been here! 'Tis Christmas morning!" Mary shouted. From the God-awful racket she was making, Thomas knew without even peeking outside his door that she had a firm grip on a wooden spoon with one hand, her biggest frying pan in the other.

Then in the blink of an eye, she was inside his room, laying down her torture device and pulling back the curtains.

"Time to get up, Thomas, lad. Santy's left ye a present under the tree," she said merrily. "I'm so delighted this family has finally gotten with the times and put up a tree. Never used to, ye know. Only started a few years back. I s'pose everyone's strivin' to keep up with the royals these days," she muttered on absently while she poured water from the ewer into the basin.

Past Christmas mornings when Ma was alive were filled with joy and laughter, despite it being just the two of them. Ma would always wake him with gentle kisses, whispering that Santy had left him a stocking full of treats. Then, he'd run as fast as his feet could carry him into the front room and pull down his sock from the tiny fireplace mantle. Without fail, he would find a new pair of mittens and a shiny red apple. Later on that day, he and his mother would sit around their small table to enjoy their feast of pheasant, turnips and biscuits. By God, how he missed her, especially today.

Thomas sighed, and instead of letting his broken heart rule the day, he smiled at the memory. Ma loved Christmas almost as much as Mary did, and he would do well to remember that Mary's happiness was his responsibility today.

"Mary, ye think ye can whip me up some of them sweet biscuits for breakfast?" he asked. Her eyes shone with delight, sending a thrill of happiness through him.

"Ready to eat a little, are ye?" she asked, handing him a cloth. "I'm glad ye got yer appetite back. Now, get yourself all cleaned up and come on downstairs like a good boy. I'll see what I can do 'bout them biscuits."

Thomas leapt from the bed and rushed to Mary's side, tucking

himself beneath her arm. “Merry Christmas, Mary. I promise to be a good boy today.” Then he wrapped his arms around her middle.

He’d been putting this haggard woman through many trials lately. However, even through it all, she had been the one who’d always made sure he’d had enough to eat, enough to do to keep busy and most times, whether she’d admit it or not, had turned his shenanigans into some semblance of entertainment. No matter how angry she pretended to be, he knew in his heart she would never be cruel or unforgiving.

When Thomas made his way down the staircase, light chatter filled his ears. Laughter and cheer echoed against the stone, a sound he had not heard within these walls in a very long time—if ever. Entering the sizeable family room where large sofas had been arranged around a sky-high Christmas tree, he found the adults sipping from their teacups engaged in the most unusual behaviour.

They were all getting along.

Lord Brady was sitting on the floor holding baby Sean’s fingers, helping the little tot to walk. “Just look how strong he is! Going to be just like his da!”

Lady Violet chortled at that. “Aye. Let’s hope he’s not as strong-willed and hard-headed too!”

Another burst of laughter rang out as Thomas retreated and concealed himself around the corner, taking this perfect opportunity to watch and listen closely.

He had indeed made up his mind about staying there, but he needed to see what he would gain if he did or what he would lose were he to leave.

The Mannings were absorbed in the various pieces of wall art Charley had installed about the space, their discussion seemingly wrapped up in an old anchor hanging on the far wall. Charley was standing there with them, her hands animated as she explained the piece’s origins.

Liam was sitting at a small table in front of the window with Quoyle and Mr. Murtagh, engaged in friendly chit-chat, which Thomas could only guess had much to do with the ongoing construction of the new ship. The fact that they were sitting together at all was astonishing!

Perhaps Liam and Charley were telling the truth. Maybe they had all mended their ways and put an end to their squabbling.

Suddenly, hope filled Thomas’s mind, making his knees weak and his heart swell. This room was teeming with family love. It was almost too lovely a sight to behold.

Straightening his wool jumper, he put one foot in front of the other, entering the room as one of them instead of the interloper he’d once

been.

Liam leapt from his seat, excitement creasing the lines around his eyes. This man would be his new da. *My new da!* Someday, Thomas would address him as Da or Papa, yet he hadn't decided which felt like the best fit yet.

"Thomas! Come in! We've been waiting for you. Come and look at what's under the tree! A present with your name on it!" Liam exclaimed.

Thomas's gaze fell upon the burlap-wrapped package and then back to Liam. Santy had never left an actual present before. Nervous little faeries began to dance in his belly. This must be how wealthy children felt on Christmas morning when ominously concealed delights were left for them by Santy.

"I…I don't need a present," he began and then looked to Charlotte, who was moving toward him with measured, tentative steps. Seeing the uncertainty in her eyes prompted him to continue, "That is, I don't need presents because this right here is the best gift ever! My new family is gettin' along!"

Liam dropped to his knee, and Thomas folded into his awaiting arms. "I guess you have made your decision, lad," he chuckled, holding Thomas so tightly he thought he'd break in two.

Thomas pulled back and stared into Liam's eyes, his gaze serious. "Aye, sir. I'll stay. But ye have to promise me we'll always be a family, just as we are today."

Liam took pause and then looked around the room thoughtfully. "Don't you see, lad? Sometimes families quarrel because they love one another so much. I cannot promise you that we will never argue again, but I can promise you that we shall always mend fences. And no matter what, you must remember that we shall always love you."

Thomas stared at a spot on the hardwood floor. *They love me.* They didn't just appreciate his service to the Kelly family; nay, they actually love him. And although they had a strange way of showing it, he had the good sense to know they loved one another too. "I hadn't thought about it like that. I thought ye all hated one another."

Charley bent in front of him and took his hands in hers. "Quite the opposite. And nothing will ever tear us apart again, I promise," she replied, taking his face in her hands and placing a kiss on each cheek.

His heart soared. How wrong he'd had it, but he couldn't help a small chuckle. "Well, if the manner in which ye fights and scratches shows how much ye loves one another, then I'd say ye're all love-struck!"

The room erupted in laughter.

"Aye, lad. Ye get it now, don't ye?" Lord Brady laughed.

Lady Violet spoke up then. "Thomas, we've got so much love that it

just keeps multiplying!" she exclaimed, patting her belly.

The room fell silent until a voice cried out. "A baby!" Miss Kylee squealed, rushing to wrap her arms around Lady Violet's neck. "I'm so thrilled! Perhaps, our two little ones will be best friends as we've become!" she exclaimed, her golden locks bouncing as she hopped up and down.

"Ye're havin' a wee bairn too? Oh Kylee!! They'll be the best of friends!!" Violet sighed happily.

Lord Brady grinned at Mr. Manning. "Now I know why ye were late returnin'. Thought to stop somewhere warm and romantic and have yerselves a little holiday?"

Mr. Manning winked. "I wasn't quite ready to share her again with the likes of ye," he chuckled.

"Well done," Lord Brady said, resting his hand on Jack's shoulder. "I nearly forgot! Since we didn't have the chance to deliver the Christmas baskets to the village yesterday, why don't you and Kylee join Vy and me today? There will be lots of little ones bouncin' 'round yer feet, all eager and waitin' to get their treats. Might be good practice for ye," Lord Brady suggested with a wink, swatting Jack on the back.

"Aye. Sounds grand," Jack replied, casting an affectionate look at his glowing wife.

Thomas smiled, but all this love stuff made him want to wretch. He watched in awe as the grown-ups all around him laughed as if there was never bad blood between them.

Then, Charley's hands lovingly squeezed his shoulders. "Congratulations to you all. We shall certainly have a blessed summer! Two brand new little ones," she beamed and then gazed down at Thomas. "Come now, open your present," she urged, her smile as wide as the ocean.

Thomas knelt in front of the tree, the first Christmas tree he had ever sat beneath, and pulled at the blue satin ribbon holding the burlap in place. It was an enormous gift, one he couldn't lay in his lap to open, but the closer he came to revealing its contents, the more excited he became.

When the last scrap of material covering the package fell away, Thomas looked up, mouth agape in awe and stared back into the loving faces before him.

"A saddle," he gasped and then his brows knit with confusion. "Sir, I don't own a horse," he said to Liam, cocking his head to the side in confusion. Running his hands over the smooth leather, Thomas imagined himself sitting atop a great steed—like Lord Brady—and galloping his days away across the Irish countryside.

"Shall we remedy that? Come with me." Liam smiled

mischievously, and Thomas followed him and Charley outside, toward the stable. Last night's snowy blizzard had quickly changed to rain, leaving only small mounds of snow scattered about, but the air smelled fresh, like a new beginning. Thomas's lungs breathed it in greedily.

Liam led them all the way to the back of the ten-stall stable, where stood a shimmering, silver Connemara pony. "He's yours, Thomas. Better give him a strong name."

Thomas couldn't believe his eyes. "Santy left me the saddle for this beautiful creature! Smart man, that Santy," he said, extending his uneasy hand out to the young stallion to get acquainted.

"He's your responsibility now, Thomas, and as you'll no longer be working for me, he *is* your job. Does that sound fine to you?" Liam asked, pulling Charley into his side.

Thomas's gaze danced between them. "Aye, sir. I'll take real good care of 'im."

Liam's expression softened, and he, too, gave the animal some unconscious affection, rubbing his hand down its hindquarter. "Someday, I should like you to call me da. Is that something that would make you happy?" he asked.

Thomas shot into both their arms and hugged them fiercely. "Happy? Sir, that would make me the happiest boy in the world. Merry Christmas."

Chapter Thirteen

Springtime had finally arrived in Galway, bringing with it new blooms and fair weather. Riding weather.

Thomas and his little silver pony, Freddy, trotted daily into the village for any reason they could find, but today's excursion had a purpose.

Today would have been Mammy's birthday, and Thomas wanted nothing more than to visit with her at the cemetery and tell her of all his adventures—and misadventures—since he had last visited. But with the onslaught of emotion he'd felt since he rose this morning, he doubted very much he could speak the words aloud. Instead, he'd spent the entire morning at the breakfast table writing a letter for his ma, with Mary's help, of course.

Since he moved in with the Kellys, Thomas's education had unfortunately been moved to the top of everyone's priority. Day after day, he learned how to work with figures and had been forced to read all kinds of boring books, all the while he stared out the window, eager to take Freddy on another escapade. But the one good thing about having a tutor was that he had finally learned to write properly. He was never so grateful for it than now.

Thomas dismounted and walked the path to his ma's graveside. A tear escaped his eye, making its slow descent down his cheek. Then, sucking in a deep, steadying breath, he attempted talking to her headstone, as Lord Brady had once told him he should.

Lord Brady and Lady Violet had been spending a lot of time at the keep since the holidays, as well as the Mannings. It seemed Thomas did, in fact, have an entire family interested in helping to raise him in their own little way. Sometimes though, he wished he could just have his new ma and da to himself.

"Ma…I…" he trailed off; the words suddenly lost to him. "I…Happy birthday, Ma," he mumbled defeatedly and pulled the letter from his coat pocket. Tucking it behind the little clay angel Charley had placed there at the service, he prayed that his words would reach Heaven.

Dear Ma,

I miss you so very much. Not a day goes by that I don't think about you and Da. I hope wherever you are, you're together. I couldn't bear knowing you're alone and unhappy when I am surrounded by so many folks who

love me.

I've been working closely with a tutor and have been doing very well in my studies. Some day, I would like to become a shipbuilder, just like Mr. Murtagh used to be before settling into the brewing business. But for now, I've been content on our trips back and forth to Newfoundland as it keeps me close to ships and the ocean.

You'll always be my mother, but I would like very much to call Lady Charlotte Ma. I hope you don't mind. She's so loving and kind and does the little things like you used to, like using her shirt sleeve to wipe dirt off my face before we enter Sunday mass. She's also been teachin' me how to fight with real daggers, although, I'm not s'posed to tell anyone that. I think you'll agree she deserves the name. She's my ma.

Likewise, Lord Kelly taking me under his wing has been the best thing to happen to me since poor Pa died. He's taught me to ride a pony and takes me fishing on days when he's able to step back from his work. We talk about all sorts of things, and I can be honest with him about anything. I'd like to call him Da. If you see father up there, could you ask him if he minds?

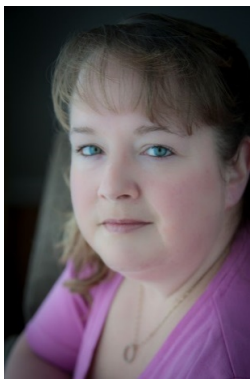
Well, Ma, I hope you're having a lovely birthday in Heaven. I love you. I will be back to visit you again soon,

Your loving son,

Thomas Kelly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Benoit, who currently resides in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, is a laboratory analyst for a major mining company and has been putting pen to paper her entire life. Her enthusiasm for all things historical, prompts her to create characters with many layers and place them in the past. Her family is originally from the small town of Lawn on the Burin Peninsula, Newfoundland, but her ancestors hail from Ireland. The Stormy Encounters Series has truly become a labour of love…a means of exploration into her family's history



[TB1].

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You can visit Tanya's website and sign up for her newsletter at: **www.tanyabenoitbooks.com**

Or follow her on Facebook (Tanya Benoit – Author); Twitter (@tanyabenoitbook); Instagram (tanyabenoitwrites)

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